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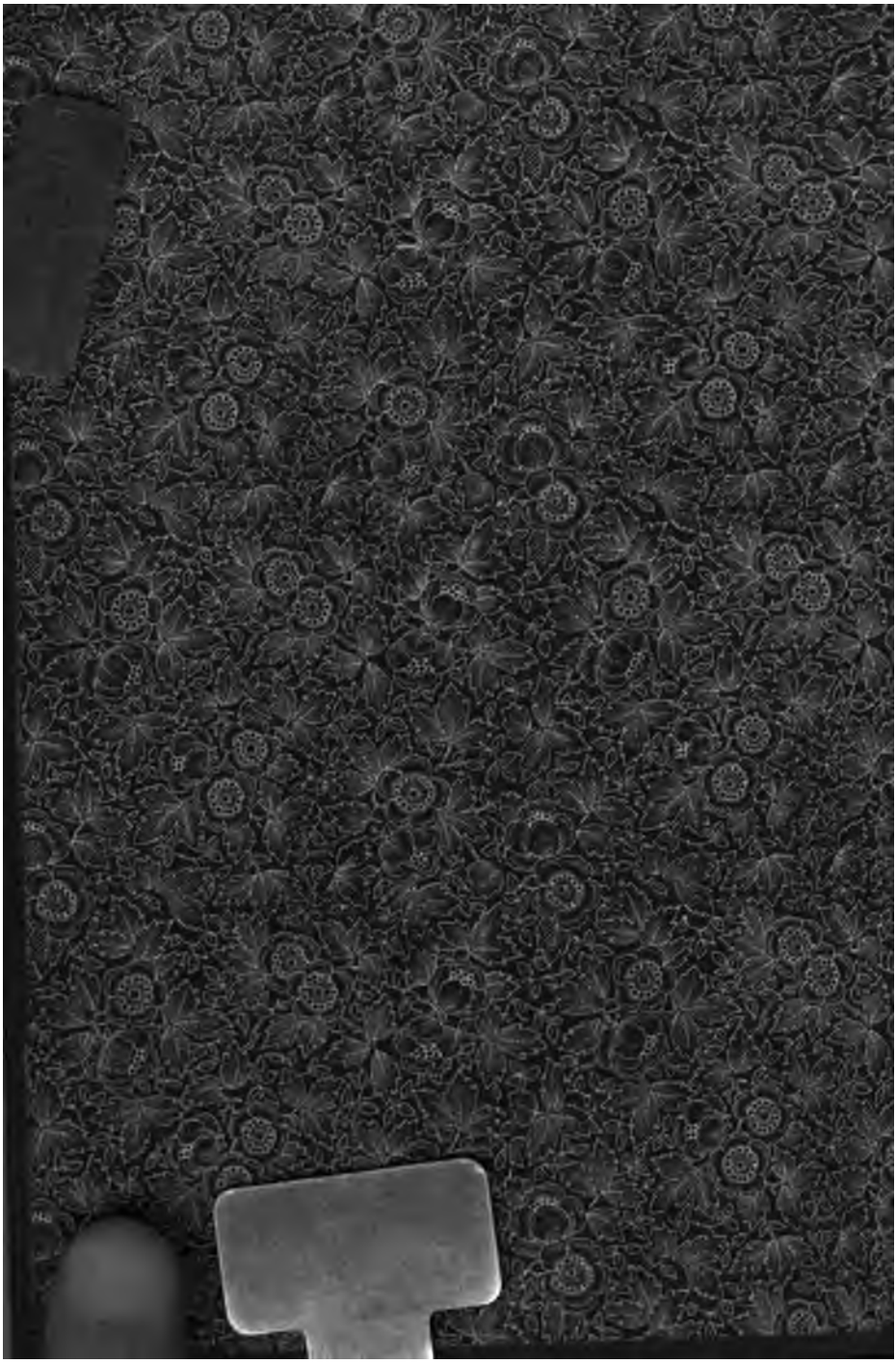
TWO MEN AND A MAID

HARRIET FOX



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TWO MEN AND A MAID.

TWO MEN AND A MAID:

A TALE.

BY

HARRIETT JAY,

AUTHOR OF 'THE QUEEN OF CONNAUGHT,' 'THE DARK COLLEEN,' 'MADGE DUNRAVEN,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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My dear Mrs Stirling,

As 'good wine needs no bush,' so a good and great name like yours needs no further honouring; but I have long wished to put yours where I, honouring it in the world's sight, might honour literature and myself. I have therefore ventured to inscribe it here, with the sympathy which all who know you well must feel, and with the gratitude which I, more than most, owe to a generous friend and a wise teacher. When I first tried to lisp in that

beautiful Art wherein you spoke and speak so beautifully and so eloquently, you assisted me with your counsel, your encouragement, and your generous approbation. Among the rich memories and tokens of a gracious fame, that will certainly not die so long as the Drama has a history, try to find a place for this Dedication—a pledge, not only of my sincere homage to a great artiste, but of my warm affection for a brave and true-hearted woman.

Believe me,

Very sincerely yours,

HARRIETT JAY.

To Mrs FANNY STIRLING.

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TWO MEN AND A MAID.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEA SANDS—LOVERS' FOOTPRINTS.

IT had been a very unpleasant morning. Seated in the high-backed vicarage pew, with her lover beside her, Alice Chepstow had been alternately listening to the pattering of the rain, and watching for stray gleams of sunshine which crept through the diamond panes of the church windows, and trembled across the floor.

There had been a hard battle between rain and sunshine, and, for a time at least, it had seemed that the rain would win, for though the showers were not of long duration, they were possessed of remarkable earnestness and strength. But when the last hymn and the last benediction were over, and the congregation streamed forth into the open air, the sun was shining as brightly as if his rule had never been interfered with, and the only tokens left by the rain were white wreaths of steam, clinging about the peaks of the highest hills, and floating in light clouds across the sea.

Alice Chepstow was glad of the change; with the light-loving instinct of delicately nurtured damsels, she disliked damp weather. During that morning the sound of the rain, pattering persistently upon the slated roof

of the half-empty church, had rendered her deaf to every word which her father said. How could she possibly think of the sermon, when her brain was so busy trying to settle the momentous question, whether, when the service was over, she should slip quietly into the vicarage, there to wait until the storm had ceased; or, boldly facing the elements, walk straight down to the shore, and, taking shelter in some sequestered nook, enjoy there the two hours' conversation with her lover, which every Sunday morning was her due?

Alice was the one representative of her house at church that day. Her sister, the only other member of the family at the vicarage,—the eldest daughter,—upon whom the duties of the dead mother had devolved; who had to help her father in his parish work; to look after the welfare of

her younger sister, and take upon herself all the troubles of home,—toiled so hard during the week, that she sometimes remained at home, merely to rest on Sunday.

But with Alice it was so different. During the week she had nothing whatever to do. To her the Sunday service was a kind of recreation to be looked forward to with pleasure, and enjoyed when it came. Regularly every Sunday, therefore, in answer to the ringing of the church bell, she started on her way, sat demurely in her pew during the service, and enjoyed a walk with her lover when the service came to an end.

Rumour, which never pauses before a pretty face, did not pass lightly by Alice Chepstow. It was averred, and pretty openly too, that there had been a time when Alice, although the clergyman's

daughter, had been by no means a perfect devotee; that during the time of her other lovers, she had been content to spend her Sundays in the vicarage garden too, or to roam along the silent sea-shore while the church bell was ringing or the villagers were at prayer. But times were different now. Richard Glamorgan had returned from his appointment in India with a fair amount of youth still left to him, and had asked Alice Chepstow to become his wife. And though the man was almost double her age, was not at all good-looking, and was of a very morose temper, she had accepted him and his fortune, and for some mysterious reason had rigorously espoused piety too. Of course the immediate cry was that, at the bidding of Richard Glamorgan, Alice Chepstow had ruthlessly broken with all her lovers, and,

merely because he was the heir of Plas Ruthven, had gleefully consented to marry him. Of course the report reached the embryo husband's ears, and there the memory of it lingered longer than he cared to say.

When Alice had sat in church that morning, listening to the pattering of the rain, her lover had been beside her; when she came out with the congregation he was before her, pushing the people to the right about, and leaving her path clear. When at length she gained the threshold, and stood eagerly drinking in the fresh breeze, he took her hand upon his arm, and the two walked away from the church and took the path which led towards the sea.

How bright the day had grown after the heavy storms of rain! The mist still clung about the hill-tops, and the grass and

heather were still dank with dew, but the sun was shining its brightest, the larks were carolling overhead, and far away, out of the shelter of the Plas Ruthven woods, Alice could hear the faint cry of the cuckoo. The sky was of a bright azure blue,—cloudless, and throbbing with heat and light. The sea was like a mirror—not a ripple to be seen anywhere; its glassy surface bright with reflected brightness from the sky.

'What a gorgeous day,' said Alice quietly. 'Now that the sun is shining, and everything looks so bright, it seems difficult to believe that very little more than an hour ago the rain was falling so heavily. I am afraid,' she continued, running glibly on, 'that during the service this morning I was dreadfully profane. I could not give my mind to the sermon;

every time the rain came down, I had a vision of you and myself sitting disconsolately in the vicarage, unable to talk and enjoy ourselves because of papa and Marion.'

She paused, but got no answer. She was not surprised at this. Her companion was evidently in a dreamy mood, more eager to drink in the beauty and quietness of the surrounding scene than to descant upon it, and Alice, falling in with his whim, walked silently along by his side. When they reached the shore, she took her seat upon the shingle, while her companion placed himself close by.

The tide had ebbed a little, just enough to leave uncovered a little strip of sand, still damp and darkened from the touch of the outgoing tide. Alice, who had seated herself close to the edge of the

shingle, began to amuse herself by throwing shells and pebbles into the smooth sea. So interested did she become in this pastime, that she seemed to forget for the moment the very existence of her companion.

She was recalled to herself by the keen scrutiny of his eyes. They were fixed upon her with a look that startled her. For a moment she returned the look in amazed silence, then she opened her lips to speak. Before she could do so, her companion had bent forward and taken both her hands.

'Alice,' he said quickly, 'I wonder if you *do* love me? I wonder if you love me better than any living creature on this earth?'

For a moment Alice stared on; then she sighed, as if relieved from a spell, and broke into a laugh.

'Do I love you?' she said. 'Do I love you? If I did not, why then should I have said "yes" when you asked me to become your wife?'

CHAPTER II.

A LOVERS' QUARREL.

'We quarrelled this morning, my lover and I,
We were out of temper and scarce knew why,
Though the cause was trivial—common.'

'IT is very strange,' continued the girl, fixing her eyes earnestly upon her companion's face; 'but during the last month you have asked me that question twelve times at least. Do I love you? I thought I had answered when I consented to marry you and to spend with you the remainder of my life.'

He smiled very grimly as he returned the girl's earnest look.

'You thought so,' he said, 'and yet, Alice, you have seen quite enough of life to know that nine girls out of ten marry for money, not love.'

An indignant flush rose to the girl's cheek, but she answered quietly enough,—

'And you think it is for money, not love, that I am going to marry you?'

'I did not say so.'

'No, you do not say so, but I had rather you did, than convey it to me as you do. You have not said you have no faith in my sincerity, my truth, my affection; and yet at times I have seen this in your eyes as plainly as if it had been written there, and once or twice when I have seen this I have thought—'

'Well, Alice, what have you thought?'

'That—that—if your opinion of me is not likely to alter, our married life will not be a very happy one—and that perhaps it might be as well for us to part before it is too late.'

She moved slightly from him as she spoke, and turned her face towards the sea.

'So we have come to the root of the matter at last,' he said. 'You really think it would be better for us to shake hands and say good-bye?'

Alice did not reply. She felt that already she had said too much. When she had uttered those words, she had done so with the view of making peace—not of uplifting between them a greater barrier than ever.

'When two people come together without sufficient trust and without sufficient

love,' he continued, seeing that she remained silent, 'parting is sure to come sooner or later, and perhaps, as you say, the early parting is the best.'

He rose as he spoke, but the girl remained silent and speechless still. She had dropped her cheek upon her hand and her eyes were fixed upon the sea, but she saw nothing, for they were dim with tears.

Such scenes as these were common between Alice Chepstow and Richard Glamorgan, although their engagement was only two months old. Lovers' quarrels they called them at home, when, after some lonely walk, Alice returned looking sad and out of heart; little episodes which came to ruffle the smooth course of love, like storms upon a summer sea. At first, the girl herself had regarded them as neces-

sary evils, and had consoled herself with the old adage, that 'the course of true love never did run smooth,' but since they had occurred so often, she had come to regard them more seriously, and to wonder if those storms were to continue in a more aggravated form after her marriage.

Did he love her? if so, why should he continually introduce cause for strife? and if he did not, why had he asked her to become his wife? He was not marrying *her* for money, of that she felt very well assured; for beyond the pin-money of fifty pounds a-year which her grandmother had left her, she had not a penny in the world. He did love her, there was no doubt of it, and as Alice took this assurance to heart she felt in a measure relieved.

'You are very unkind to me,' she said, struggling to repress her tears. 'It is I,

not you, who ought to say, "Do you care for me?"'

'You think so, Alice?'

'I am sure of it. If I doubted you as you doubt me, you would never believe in my affection at all!'

She had risen from her seat, and now stood before him with eager, outstretched hands. It was very peaceful all around them, with the sort of peace which is invariably brought by the shining of the mid-day sun. The cuckoo still told his name to the hills, the larks carolled overhead, and out at sea a flock of seagulls hovered, uttering faint far-away cries. These, and the monotonous washing of the water, were the only sounds to be heard.

'I *did* think,' said Alice, biting her quivering lip, 'that we should have had a pleasant walk to-day. When we were in

church I felt miserable because it rained; I wish now that it had continued to rain. I wish we had had to sit in the vicarage until nightfall. Anything would have been better than quarrelling like this!'

'Whose fault is it that we quarrel?'

'Yours,' returned Alice promptly. 'You watch me about like a cat watching a mouse; and no matter what I do or say I am sure to be wrong! Richard, why can you not trust me?' she continued, after an impassioned pause, again turning towards him, and outstretching her trembling hands; 'why will you not believe me, once and for all, and set those wicked doubts of yours at rest for ever?'

He stooped towards her, took her face in both his hands, and kissed her quivering lips.

'Alice, my darling,' he said quietly, 'you

do not understand. It is my great love for you that makes me what I am. My life is yours to make or mar just as much as if you were one of the old Fates, and held the scales of my destiny in your little hand.'

'Is that so?' she said, raising her smiling eyes to his face; 'then your life will be a very happy one; so happy that you will wish you had trusted me from the very first!'

She put her hand through his arm, and they walked away together; Alice leaving a print of tiny footprints behind her—and several jagged marks from the end of her parasol. Now that she believed the storm was over she was quite content, little dreaming that in less than half-an-hour she would be plunged into still greater disturbances than before.

'In order to punish you for your cruelty to me to-day,' she said, looking up into the grave face which was just an inch above her, 'I shall make you take me to-morrow over to Glen Ruthven. We will dip into the magic pool and see if we are to have any more quarrels. Shall we?'

He smiled down upon her.

'If you wish it, Alice, but I warn you that I am not superstitious, and that I have no faith in the fortune-telling powers of water or any other element. I hope you have none?'

'Well,' returned Alice earnestly, 'I do not know — certainly I never did believe the strange tales until I dipped into it with Philip Kingston, and—and—'

She paused, blushed painfully, then turned white and frightened. What had happened? Nothing apparently. They were still walking amicably side by side, she

looking up, he looking down, still with the same grave quiet expression in his eyes. But though no change was apparent, Alice felt that the whole soul of her companion had suddenly arisen in tumult.

'Who is Philip Kingston?' he asked presently, seeing that she remained silent.

Alice turned away her head.

'Philip Kingston is Philip Kingston,' she replied, in as light a tone as she could assume. 'He was brought up here, but he left about six months ago, and I hear he is studying in Rome!'

'Why did he go away, Alice?'

'I should imagine,' returned the girl, gazing around her with a strange forced smile, 'because he did not find his artistic talents sufficiently appreciated in the wilds of Wales.'

Silence again,—not even the sound of

the measured footsteps on the sand. The sun was shining more brightly than ever, but Alice felt quite cold and sick at heart.

'How chilly it is getting,' she said presently; 'this is a very changeable day!'

'It is not cold, Alice. It is hotter than it has been all day, and the sun is shining upon you brightly enough to give you sunstroke. Put up your parasol!'

The girl obeyed his orders, withdrawing her hand from his arm to do so. When the parasol was up; its handle resting upon her left shoulder, its lace wafting a refreshing breeze about her head and face, she summoned up sufficient courage to raise her eyes.

'Shall I shelter you? The sun is shining full upon your head!'

'I have been in India, and am used to it!'

Silence again. The two were walking apart by this time. Alice had not been asked to replace her hand upon her companion's arm, and she had not chosen to do so without an invitation. Thus they walked on for fully ten minutes; then the man spoke again.

'Alice?'

'Yes.'

'Did this man—this Mr Kingston—paint the portrait of you that hangs in your father's dining-room?'

'Yes.'

'And did he not give you your dog?'

'Yes.'

'Anything else?'

'Yes, a ring, the one with the blue stones in it.'

Silence again, broken this time by the girl.

'Philip Kingston was always very

friendly with us,' she said. 'Are you angry that he should have given me those things?'

'No; it was natural. I have nothing whatever to say against *him!*'

'Only against me! You are very unjust. I could not help his caring for me!'

'You could help telling me a lie about it.'

'I have told you no lie!' returned the girl, flashing up into real anger at last.

'Dissimulation is another name for lying. You intended to make me believe that you and this man were nothing to each other, whereas you were engaged to him, I suppose?'

'I was never engaged to Philip Kingston in my life,' returned Alice quickly.

'Then why did you dabble your hands together in the Devil's Pool at Glen Ruthven?'

'He was very fond of me,' quietly returned the girl, 'and he wanted me to marry him, but I felt I could not care for him enough, and I told him so; yet he urged me so much to try to like him that at last I consented. I promised to think of no one but him for one month, and if at the end of the month I still felt I could not marry him, he said he would trouble me no more. I refused to be regularly engaged, but he pressed me to take the ring; so I did take it.'

'Well?'

'We were a good deal together during that month. He took my portrait and gave me my dog Oscar. One day we all went a picnic to Glen Ruthven, and that was the day we dipped our hands in the basin for fun. . . . A week from that day he asked me finally if I would

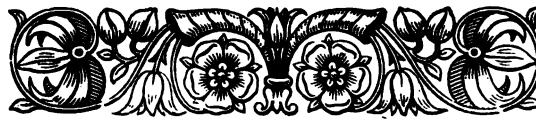
marry him, and I said "No." I offered him back the ring and Oscar, but he would not take either. He said he did not care for dogs, and as he was going away, and we might never met again, would I do him the favour of wearing his ring.'

'And you do wear it! I have seen it on your finger.'

'Yes, I have worn it ever since. It is only a memento of an old friend. If you wish it I will take it off.'

'You will do nothing of the kind,' he said abruptly. 'Good-bye.'

Without another word or look he left her.



CHAPTER III.

PEEPS INTO THE PAST.

HE left her standing before a little green gate, which was half smothered in a hawthorn hedge. Behind the hedge nestled the vicarage, Alice Chepstow's home. A cottage looking like a Swiss chalet, a rambling, uneven, three-cornered place, with every vestige of its wall hidden behind a profusion of ivy, and some strange wild creeping plant which bore bright red berries all the year round. Behind it the hills rose, and before it was expanded the open sea.

Alice did not look at either—her eyes were steadily fixed upon the man who was walking rapidly away. Would he turn? No—there was no sign of it. The head was resolutely set upon the shoulders; the step was decided and very firm; he moved steadily forward until he passed round a turn in the road and disappeared.

Alice watched, and as she did so she felt a lump rise in her throat which almost choked her, and all the prospect began to swim before her eyes. She felt impelled to call to him: had she done so her voice would not have reached him: it would have died away amidst the silence of the shore.

'Alice, do not linger. You are late already, dear—the dinner is almost served!'

Alice did not look up: had she done so she would have seen her sister—who,

having run upstairs to prepare herself for dinner—had seen the lovers separate at the gate.

'Come in, child,' continued Marion Chepstow, leaning still further out of the window. 'Solitary walks and loving speeches may be very satisfying, perhaps they are, but remember papa and I have had neither—we are very hungry, and the dinner is quite done!'

'I am coming, Marion!'

And Alice, her throat still swollen, her eyes still dim, turned, pushed open the gate, and passed through. She entered the house unperceived, ran quickly up to her room, and hastily casting off her hat, jacket, and gloves—stood irresolute at her door when the dinner bell chimed loudly through the house. To Alice the sound was not welcome. She felt sick and dis-

pirited, and she had much ado to keep the tears from her eyes. But she knew she must go down: if she absented herself from the dinner table, the cross questionings of her father and sister would be sure to drag from her the account of that morning's adventure, and Alice had very strong reasons for wishing that it should not be brought to light. So she quietly descended the stairs and entered the dining-room, just as the last sound of the bell had ceased. Her father and sister had both taken their seats — without a word to either she took hers.

It was very cool and refreshing here— much more so than it had been out on the sands or in the church that morning, and Alice, folding her delicate hands on the snowy cloth before her, and turning her face towards the window, felt that the

peace and coolness of the room were already acting as a sedative to still her throbbing nerves. The window was thrown wide open, and the breeze, which was wafted down from the hill tops, and crept into the room to touch the faces of those within, brought with it the sweet subtle scent of flowers. Though Alice had come down to join in the meal, she had not been able to trust herself to speak, but, save by her sister, her silence had not been observed. Mr Chepstow, noted in the village for his strange dreaminess and absence of mind, was thinking more of his sermon than the dinner or company; but Marion, looking up quickly when her sister entered the room, saw the quivering lips, the heaving breast, the tear-dimmed, downcast eye. She checked the bantering words which were

upon her tongue, and, turning to the table, proceeded to eat her dinner in silence. But when, the moment the last course was disposed of, Alice rose and made for the door, Marion also pushed back her chair as if she too were about to depart; at this Mr Chepstow awakened from his dream, and assuming that they were about to prepare to accompany him on his Sunday visiting, told them to hasten, in order that the first part of the walk might be accomplished while the sun was still high.

Alice paused, gazed over her father's head, with an appealing look at her sister, then hastily quited the room.

'Alice has a headache, papa,' said Marion, in explanation. 'We shall have to wait a little,' and, having seen to her father's comforts, she hurried upstairs to find out if

possible the real cause of her sister's trouble.

She found Alice seated on her bedroom floor, her face buried in the white counterpane, her whole body convulsed with sobs. Marion knelt down beside her, stroked her hair, patted her head, and tried to soothe her into more tranquil sorrow.

'Alice, do not cry so; tell me, dear, what is the meaning of all this?'

As soon as the violence of her grief had somewhat abated, Alice laid her head on her sister's shoulder, and cried quietly there.

'We have quarrelled again, Marion—that's all.'

The elder girl buried her delicate fingers amidst the soft tresses of her sister's hair.

'The old story,' she returned gently.

'Alice, my pet, have you quarrelled for the last time? Have you really summoned up courage to-day to break off your engagement with Richard Glamorgan?

Alice raised her head, passed her handkerchief over her burning cheeks, and gazed at her sister with wondering, tearful eyes.

'Broken off our engagement!' she exclaimed. 'No, Marion; it's not quite so bad as that. He will be sure to come round in the end; but indeed he is too hard upon me!'

For a moment Marion sat silent; she was disappointed, and, indeed, as angry as it was possible for her to be. Only another lovers' quarrel! And she had hoped—earnestly hoped—when she had looked that day upon her sister's pale face and quivering lips, that the engagement which had brought

with it so much sorrow and very little gladness, had at length come to an end. In Marion's opinion the engagement had been a mistake altogether. It was incongruous, she thought, that Alice, who, all her life, had been the spoilt pet of every one, and who had received plenty of suitable offers of marriage, should at length fall to the share of a gloomy misanthrope —almost a misogynist, who loved her with the cruel earnestness of a tiger, and seemed determined to wear her young life away in savage quarrels and disputes.

'Alice,' she said quietly, 'if you have not already broken with Richard, take my advice, and do so now. It will be a wrench at first, no doubt, for you have set your foolish little heart upon him so much; but, believe me, my darling, it will save you many years of weary sorrow. He is not

the man for you, Alice; if you marry him, he will break your heart, and hurry you to an early grave.'

Alice did not reply. She had replaced her head on her sister's shoulder, and was crying quietly again, holding her handkerchief over her mouth to stifle the sound of her broken hysterical sobs. Marion placed her arm around her sister's waist, and quietly spoke on,—

'You do not know Richard as I know him, Alice, or perhaps you would not love him quite so much. You were in France when he came home to spend a few weeks at Plas Ruthven before going to India; but I was here, and I saw him very often indeed. They told strange stories about him in the village. Some said he was brutally unkind to dumb animals; some, that he was kind, self-sacrificing, and good.

I did not believe much in either, for I know what stories our villagers can tell; but one day I had an opportunity of judging for myself. I was coming home from the village, when I suddenly came upon Richard walking with his dog along the shoulder of Glen Heather Hill. He was training the dog, and, as the afternoon was fine, and I was not in a hurry, I sat down on the heather to watch what was going on. Richard was a manly-looking young fellow in those days, Alice — tall and straight as a dart, with a fine, handsome open face, and the loveliest black eyes I have ever seen. As I looked at him, I found myself disbelieving every one of the unpleasant stories I had heard. There was no vice in him, I said to myself, and all the stories I had heard were but malignant inventions to bring him into discredit

amongst his own people. He was so fond of the dog, too, which gambolled at his side, fixing its gentle eyes upon him, and obeying every wave of his hand.'

Alice sighed, and raised her aching head.

'I always knew he was kind—I told you so, Marion, and now you acknowledge it yourself.'

Marion smiled sadly as she looked into her sister's tear-stained face. She took the trembling hands between her own, and stroked them gently.

'Will you listen a little longer, Alice?' she said very softly. 'I do not wish to pain you, darling—your happiness is very dear to me. It is in order to try and spare you years of pain that I tell you this story now. Well, I watched this lover of yours — watched him with delight, admiration, and a certain sense of shame—

delight and admiration for his beauty, shame at myself for having been made to believe that he was brutal and a coward. Had I risen and walked home at once I should always have admired that man; but, my dear, I sat on.'

'Yes, Marion.'

Alice's tears were not flowing now: she was taking too intense an interest in her sister's story. Her red tear-stained cheeks had turned white, her folded hands were white and trembling too; she uttered the 'Yes, Marion,' in a hushed kind of eager voice as if she feared, yet longed, to draw forth the end of the story. And Marion spoke on, not looking at the pale, wistful, beautiful face, not touching now the cold trembling hands lest her courage, already shaken, might altogether fail.

'Well, dear, just as I was about to rise

and walk on, the dog became possessed of a stubborn fit, a contest ensued between him and his master, and I waited to see the result. For a long time Richard was patient; he tried caresses and punishment, all to no purpose, the dog held the mastery, when suddenly I heard a savage cry, and the next moment the butt end of the gun was uplifted and fell, striking the poor animal motionless at his master's feet!'

'Dead?'

'So I thought. The blow which had killed the poor creature seemed to have stunned me. I sat trembling and cold, utterly unable to move or speak, with my eyes fixed upon the dog which lay prostrate on the hill. Suddenly I saw the head raised. I ran forward, and was just in time to see the poor creature raise a pair of gentle, reproachful eyes to the face of his master,

and after bestowing a caress upon the hand which had dealt its death blow, fall back and breathe its last at Richard's feet! I looked at him—how his face had changed! His lips were livid, his teeth close set, a profuse perspiration had broken out upon his forehead. We regarded each other for a few moments in silence, then, when the strange faintness and sickness which had come upon me in a measure passed off, I opened my lips to speak. "Mr Glamorgan," I said, "you are a brutal coward! I would not give you a dog for all the world!" Would you believe it, Alice, he laughed,—with that poor dumb creature, a sacrifice to his evil passions, lying dead at his feet. "Of course," said he, pointing to the dog, "all your sympathies are centred there, and yet, Miss Chepstow, incredible as it may seem to you, I am the most to be pitied of us two

to-day! That was my favourite dog!" I could not answer him; sick and disgusted I turned away and left him with his dead dog alone. I afterwards learned that he carried the body home, had it buried as carefully as if it had been a child, and placed above its grave a small white marble stone!'

Marion paused, but Alice said nothing. She had risen from her seat upon the floor and walked over to the open window and stood now with folded arms upon the sill, and face bent forward as if for air. She was white and cold, and trembling violently, as if the warm breath of summer which crept in from the hills and the sunlit ocean, struck a chill to her heart. Marion walked over to the window too, and folded her arms around her sister's trembling form.

'You can understand now, dear,' she con-

tinued softly, 'why it was I uttered that sharp little cry of pain when you came home to us that afternoon after your long walk on the hills, and told us with such a contented smile that you were to be Richard Glamorgan's wife. You thought I was jealous, dear, I saw the suspicion in your eyes; but I did not mind it, for I knew you were altogether wrong. My only thought, my only fear, was that if you married Richard you would be espousing pain and sorrow, and perhaps an early death!'

'And yet you did not speak, Marion?'

'Because I thought, after the first shock of the announcement was over, "Perhaps by this time he is changed!"'

'And so he is changed,' returned Alice quickly. 'I know he has not led a spotless life; but then who has? and because he possessed a bad temper and did some cruel

things in his youth, that is no reason why they should be brought against him now! If that was always done—if certain little things could not be forgotten, I wonder how many of us would escape blame. I should not, for one,' concluded Alice, making a weary attempt at a smile. 'If I had always been as I am now, Richard and I would not quarrel quite so much as we do?'

'You have been very bad, Alice,' said Marion quietly, smiling in spite of herself.

'Well, not exactly *bad*,' returned Alice; 'but I have been foolish at times, and done things of which Richard does not approve. I have been too fond of admiration, and have had too many stupid little love affairs to please him!'

'That is all in the past.'

'Of course it is, but then he will rake

up the past, and so we quarrel. I do not like him to do it, Marion, and what I do not like in him, I will not do.'

For a time the two girls were silent, Alice still with her arms upon the window-sill; her pale face turned towards the sea. Marion bent towards her and whispered softly,—

'Alice, suppose you heard that this man was not changed; that his character is still notorious, that there are other things, well known to all but you, which—'

Alice shuddered, turned her pale face towards her sister, and looked at her with eyes full of pitiful entreaty.

'Don't you think we have had enough, Marion, just for one day?' she said.

Marion paused, irresolute now, her firmness utterly shaken, she had wounded her sister to no purpose already, should

she withhold the one final stab, which might be her salvation.

'Alice,' she said, 'do you remember the story which I told you the other day about the man who tried to *kill* the woman he loved because he thought she had deceived him? . . . The hero of that story was Richard Glamorgan too!'

Silence again, then Alice turned and fixed her eyes upon the sea.

'There is papa calling,' she said wearily. 'I think, Marion, as I have a headache, you two had better go to the village without me to-day.'

CHAPTER IV.

'WAS IT A VISION, OR A WAKING DREAM.'

MARION remained silent for a moment. Then she asked,—

'And you, Alice?'

'I shall stay here. Say to papa that I have a headache, with walking too far along the sands to-day.'

Alice again turned her face to the open window, while Marion prepared to do as her sister commanded her. Where was the use of further lingering, further protestation, the infliction of further pain? At that moment Marion would have given

worlds to recall what she had already said, to withdraw all the poisoned darts which during that afternoon she had been plunging in her sister's heart. Since the words had been useless, it would have been better to have left them unsaid, but since the past could not be recalled, Marion determined to try and do better in future. So because Alice wished it, she put on her bonnet to go to the village, secretly determining to do all in her power to prevent the lovers' quarrel of that day from becoming known.

On descending the stairs she found her father waiting for her—eager to be gone, and anxious in his inquiries for Alice.

'Alice has a headache, she cannot go with us to-day, papa,' said Marion quietly; then she allayed all her father's anxiety, and led him away, leaving Alice still shut up

in her room, and the servant, who had been left at home to take special care of her, comfortably at tea in the kitchen.

There had been a good deal of delay that afternoon, so by the time they were on the high road to the village, the best part of the day had gone, the sun was sinking quickly in the west, its bright beams ever growing fainter. As the front door shut with a bang, Alice's heart gave a flutter of delight and she bent eagerly forward to watch the figures as they went up the hill. All Marion's efforts seemed to be concentrated in urging her father forward and preventing him from looking up at the little window where Alice's face was to be seen. They walked steadily forward, never once looking back, and Alice, watching with saddened, tear-dimmed eyes, saw them disappear round a turn in the road. Then

she rose with a sigh, and went wearily downstairs again.

The house was very quiet now. Alice shut herself in the dining-room, opened the window, pulled down the sun-blind; and throwing herself wearily into an easy chair, again drank in the balmy breath of the afternoon air. Her eyes were sadly regarding the portrait which Philip Kingston had painted, and which hung on the wall right before her face—her thoughts were carrying her back over a period of years. How long she sat she did not know,—she was aroused from her reverie by the fiery scrutiny of a pair of eyes. The eyes of her lover, who stood outside the window quietly regarding her.

He had entered stealthily by the side entrance of the garden, taken his stand upon the lawn, and quietly watched the girl

as she sat ruminating upon the past, and gazing with saddened tear-dimmed eyes upon her own face. While she remained quietly seated, he had kept back; but when she rose and looked into his eyes he opened the glass door and entered the room.

'Alice!'

The girl did not answer; after the first start of surprise was over she resolutely quelled the troubled beating of her heart and turned her head away. The memory of that morning's interview was still fresh within her, as fresh almost as the story which her sister had told, and although, if he had kept away, she would have been very much inclined to try to forget, she felt by no means so forgiving, now that he was the first to hold out the flag of truce. So when he stretched forth his hands, she quietly eluded his grasp, and

asked for what purpose he had come there that night.

'To make peace,' he said.

'And how long is the peace to last?' returned the girl quietly. 'Until to-morrow?'

'Say rather all our lives!'

Alice laughed petulantly.

'That is so likely, is it not?' she said. 'Do you know it is just six months since I first met you, just two since we became engaged, and yet already our quarrels have become a bye-word at home. If, after a walk with you, I return with no signs of pain upon my face, everybody is astonished; if, on the contrary, my face is swollen with crying, they seem to accept it as the natural state of things, and pay no heed!'

She paused as if for an answer, but none came. He had turned his back upon her now, and stood with his hands thrust deep

in his pockets—his tall broad muscular form filling up the window and darkening the room; while from her distant corner the girl gazed upon him in saddened silence.

'We have spent a pleasant Sunday,' she continued, in a tone made more irritable by the silence of her companion; 'and all on account of this picture and this ring. Well, whether or not we quarrel in future, the cause of our quarrel to-day shall not remain!'

So saying, she pulled the ring from her finger and tossed it out of the window into the garden; then lifting down the picture from the wall, she took up a penknife and slit the canvas from top to bottom.

Then she looked up and caught her companion's eye.

He had merely turned round. He stood now with his back, instead of his face, to

the window, his hands still thrust in his pockets, his eyes fixed with a strange, sad look upon her face. For a time they regarded each other in silence, then the girl sank down upon the floor in a passionate flood of tears. Still Richard Glamorgan said nothing, but over his face there passed a dark troubled look. He passed out through the window, stepped down into the garden, and picked up Alice's ring. It had had a hard fall on the gravel, and some of the blue stones were gone, but, damaged as it was, he carried it into the room again.

'Alice,' he said quietly, 'here is your ring!'

He knelt down on the carpet before her and stretched forth his right hand, holding the frail little loop of gold between his thumb and finger. The girl raised for a moment her tear-dimmed eyes.

'It is broken,' she said, then covering her face again, she wept hysterically.

How dark the man's countenance grew! For a moment the whole of his body seemed to tremble like a bough shaken by the wind. He rose to his feet, walked once or twice up and down the room, then paused again before her. Instead of kneeling, he stretched forth his hands, lifted her to her feet, and folded her in his arms.

'Alice,' he said, 'do not cry so; where is the use of it all? We will be as happy as we can to-night, and to-morrow we will go together to Plas Ruthven, and dip our hands in the Devil's Pool.'

Alice had ceased her crying, but she now looked up with wild, frightened eyes.

'Go there!' she said hurriedly. 'No, no, we will not do that now!'

'Why, are you afraid?'

'Afraid? Of what?'

'That your love will not stand the test?'

The girl's face clouded in a moment.

'I wonder when you will cease to doubt me,' she said. 'If I am afraid, as you seem to fancy, do you think I should have proposed that very expedition when we were on the beach to-day? I was not afraid then, and I am not afraid now, but since this morning I have learned to hate the place. It is solely through the mention of that, that we have had such an unpleasant day.'

'Yes, it has not been a pleasant day,' he said quietly. 'You have got a torn picture, a broken ring, and several unpleasant hours to think over.' Then bending his head and holding her closer to him, he said, 'Kiss me, my darling. We will go to the basin to-morrow, and if our for-

tune is fair, I will promise before God never to doubt your love again!'

'And if it is not?'

He started, and his face grew troubled —ere he could speak, however, the girl hurriedly answered for him.

'And if it is not,' she said, 'you must remember that you have no faith in the fortune-telling powers of the water—we will love each other just the same as if that episode had never been!'

She clung to him closer as she spoke, smoothed her delicate fingers down his coat sleeve, and laid her soft cheek upon his breast. Her passion and her sorrow had all died away by this time, and a gentle serene happiness filled her soul. It was worth the trouble of the day to feel this one hour of bliss. The torn picture still stood beside her, the broken ring still lay in her

lover's palm—but Alice did not think of either—*his* eyes were the only ones which fell upon the picture, his hand alone felt the ring. But he kept his arms about her and held her to him, stooping now and again to kiss her pretty lips or smooth back the hair from her still burning brow—while she returned his caresses with a loving fondness, which succeeded for the time in making him too forget.

So they stood, silent, forgetful; feeling only the beating of each other's hearts, the soft sweet kisses,—while all around them the darkness gathered as the sun slowly sank to rest.

Presently the moon came out, flooding with light the lawn and the garden, and casting its white beams up to the very threshold of the room. Alice Chepstow started as the hall clock chimed nine.

'How late it is!' she said; 'how the time has flown by since you came, Richard!' then placing her hands upon his shoulders, and looking up brightly into his face, she added, 'It was good of you to come. If you had not, I think I should have walked up to Plas Ruthven and made peace with you there. I could not have gone to bed unless we had made peace!'

'You are happy now, my darling?'

'Yes, quite happy!' she said with a sigh.

He bent to kiss her again.

'Good-night,' he said; then, after a few more caresses, a few more gentle words, he prepared to go. He had passed through the door and was about to close it after him, when it was suddenly flung open again, and he stepped back.

'Alice,' he said, 'what time shall I come

for you to-morrow? We have a walk of three miles before us, and if we do the thing properly, we must dip our hands in the basin some time before midday.'

He spoke lightly, smiling as he did so, but there was something in his tone which pained the girl.

'You need not come for me at all!' she said. 'I should like to go out early, so I will meet you at the gate lodge at half-past nine!' Then she raised her face again; he kissed her and went away.

As soon as he was gone, Alice sat down in the chair where he had found her, and fell into a reverie again. The room was very ghostly, for it was flooded with moon-beams and full of dark shadows, and the wind, which had grown very chilly, was still coming in at the window and blowing full into her face. She had not sat long before

she began to shiver, so she rose, closed the window and lit the lamp. No sooner had she done so than a tap came to the door, and the maid-servant entered.

'Are you ready for your supper, Miss Alice?' she said.

'I don't want any to-night, Jane.'

As Alice spoke she turned her back upon the maid, partly to hide the signs of emotion which she knew were still visible in her face, and partly to impede a view of the torn picture.

'May I lay the cloth for the master, and Miss Chepstow?'

'In a minute or so. I am going to bed Jane, but you can sit up until they come home.'

Then the girl retired, and Alice was alone again. She hurriedly lifted the torn picture, carried it up to her room, and

locked it in the wardrobe; then she began to make her preparations for bed. Alice did not usually retire so early, and that night she felt more wakeful than common; so when she had exchanged her dress for a dressing-gown, and let down her hair, she turned down the lamp, drew her chair up to the window and sinking into it, again relapsed into thought. How quiet it was all about her! She could hear the maid moving about down below, making the doors creak as she went and came, the clock ticking in the hall, but nothing more. Outside, the moonlight was still very bright, flooding the lawn, round which the woods loomed black as ebony. As Alice sat looking out upon the pale mystic light, she found herself thinking over all that had happened that day; the morning spent in the church,

the walk along the sands, and lastly, of the torn picture. It was this last catastrophe which now in her calmer moments weighed most heavily upon her mind, for she began to wonder what the young artist who painted the picture would think if he should ever know. Besides, she was ashamed, ashamed of herself and a little angry with her lover, for, after all, was it not through him that she had been made to act so? He had worked her up to frenzy, and then with one rash act she had done a deed which might become the means of bringing acute pain to the heart of an innocent man. In one angry moment she had wilfully destroyed the work which, as she well knew, it had taken months of love and labour to produce.

And now she began to think over what her sister had said to her in the morning,

and to wonder for the first time whether or not this man to whom she had unresistingly given her love, was destined forever to dim the brightness of her days?

Whenever her interviews with him were over, and no matter how bright those interviews had been, there was always an afterglow of irritation, and that night the irritation seemed stronger than it had ever been before. It seemed to take away all the pleasure which his kisses had brought to her; all the peace and serenity which she should have felt in the consciousness of her love for him, his love for her. For love is trust, and trust is love.

Had he been able to fold her to his bosom, and cast out from his heart all doubts and fears, Alice Chepstow would

have clung to him (so, at least, she thought) loving, revering, honouring as few girls could do. He had the golden ball of happiness at his feet, and he knew not what to do with it.

She sat on, dreaming half sadly, half happily, while before her vision floated her own fair face. It had come at first as it appeared on the torn canvas of the picture, but gradually it assumed a more realistic form, and grew so awful that she gazed on intently, feeling her whole body turn as cold as stone. She saw herself standing upon the lawn, with the moonlight clinging all round her, and her soft white radiance, as if from the stars falling upon her head, her slight figure dressed in white, with golden hair falling upon her shoulders,—and a face—her own face, but sadder, and with a look of divine love

about the eyes, gazing up at something which she could not see. Alice gazed on. The vision expanded, another form appeared, tall and dark, with black shadows all around completely removed from the radiance shed by moon and stars, and bearing the face of her lover, Richard Glamorgan. The figure stood before her, his eyes gazing into hers. His left hand encircled her waist, his lips were bent to hers—when suddenly he raised his right hand and struck her to the ground.

A wild cry rose on the air. Alice leapt from her chair, where sleep and an evil dream had found her, and gazed wildly around the room.

CHAPTER V.

FIRST GLIMPSE OF PLAS RUTHVEN.

'A jolly place, he said, in times of old;
But something ails it now; the place is cursed.'

YES, she had been sleeping: the vision was born of a troubled dream, but it had been so realistic that the memory of it remaining with her made her faint with fear. Trembling, she looked around the room; it was in semi-darkness. The shaded lamp burnt dimly on the dressing-table, and the moonbeams coming in at the window made dull white beams across the floor.

It seemed to her to have grown colder. She closed the window, drew the thick red curtains to shut out the moonbeams, and turned up the light of the lamp. That was better, but the room was still chilly, and from the effects either of the night air or her dream, she was still trembling violently. She walked over to the fireplace. A well rosined catherine wheel reposed in the grate, a well-filled coal-box stood close beside the fender. Both had held their places undisturbed for fully two months ; with the fading of the winter weather, the necessity of fires had also departed, and the rooms at the rectory had assumed a cold grey cheerless look. Or so it seemed to Alice that night; for as she glanced around her room, with its dimity hangings, its little vases full of flowers, its pure white bed, she thought, with a shudder, it had never looked so

ghostly, so repelling, so cold. It was the grate which did it all, the black grate holding only its little rosined wheel! So she knelt on the hearth, threw down a few coals, and applied a match to the wheel. Then she rose from her kneeling position, and saw for the first time that her sister—still wearing her bonnet and cloak and carrying a tray in her hand—stood upon the threshold of the open door, quietly regarding her. Marion made a little movement, half in amazement, half of protest, as her eyes fell upon the vivid tongues of flame which were darting up the chimney.

'Things are turning topsy-turvy,' she said; 'a fire on a warm evening at the latter end of July!'

'I was cold!' said Alice, kneeling down again upon the hearthrug, and holding her trembling hands still nearer to the blaze.

'Cold? yes, and hungry too,' continued Marion, now advancing steadily into the room. 'I was shocked to hear from Jane that you had had nothing to eat since dinner, and then you took hardly enough to sustain life in a fly. So I have brought this to tempt you,' she added, setting the tray on a small table which she had drawn close up to her sister's side; 'look, Alice dear, fresh gathered strawberries, some bread and butter and a glass of my own cowslip wine!'

Alice raised her head and opened her eyes.

'Where did you get the strawberries, Marion?'

'Eat some, dear, and I will tell you. They came from Mostyn Towers.'

'From Mrs Kingston?'

'Yes. We called there on our way home to-night, and when she heard you had a

headache with walking in the sun, she asked me to bring you this little basket of strawberries and some fresh cut flowers! A letter came from Philip last night, and in it there was a message for you!'

'For *me?*'

'Yes. He asks when you are going to be married, and wants to know whether, when you are Mrs Glamorgan, you will make him a present of the portrait he painted of you before he went away. Mrs Kingston asked if you would go over to-morrow and read the message for yourself. I said you should go! Poor Philip! He was very fond of you, Alice!' she concluded with a sigh.

While she had been speaking she had opened the window to put the flowers outside; she closed it again, drew together the curtains, and turned to look at her

sister. Alice was still seated on the hearth-rug, her hands lying listlessly in her lap.

'Will you not taste the strawberries, dear?'

Alice shook her head. How could she eat them, knowing what she did? She was thinking of the torn picture; the broken ring.

'I cannot go to Mostyn Towers to-morrow!' she said petulantly; 'you should not have accepted for me, Marion. I am going to Glen Ruthven!'

Marion looked at her sister for a moment in grave sad silence; then she walked over and took a seat at her side.

'Richard was here this afternoon, was he not, Alice?' she said.

'Yes.'

'And you have quarrelled again?'

'No, Marion, we have made it up and

are quite good friends, but it has been a wretched afternoon for me. I have destroyed Philip Kingston's picture and his ring!'

Then, holding her sister's hand, she told her all, taking upon herself the greater portion of the blame, and excusing her lover, but quite unconsciously letting her sister see how matters really stood.

The story ended, Alice felt relieved, and with the lightening of her mind everything around her seemed to brighten too. Then Marion gave her one or two comforting words, and promised to keep the matter secret, and to try to repair the damage on the morrow. After that the two girls sat for a time in silence. The fire continued to crackle and send forth its livid tongues of flame, and the sisters sitting before it, reflected its lights and

shadows in their faces and on their hair. All in the house was still. More than half-an-hour had passed since they heard their father's footsteps passing steadily to his room; his door closed, and its sound was the beginning of silent night. They had heard, after that, the clock tick steadily, now and then a faint rustle in the ivy outside, but nothing more.

'After all a fire is pleasant, even when the time of year is the latter end of July,' said Marion at length, bending her face a little nearer to the blaze; 'I wonder,' she continued quietly, 'whether they ever have anything so comforting as a fire in Plas Ruthven?'

Alice turned her head and looked at her sister, with eyes full of mild reproach.

'You have always something to say against Plas Ruthven!' she said.

'Yes, dear, I hate the place. I shall never get over the horror which it inspired in me when I was a child. The horror was reawakened in me to-day. We, papa and I, had occasion to pass it by this afternoon, and as my eye fell upon the spot I thought I had never seen it look more ghostly. The sun was shining brightly, but not a gleam of it penetrated *there;* the walls of the house looked blacker than ever; and all around it clustered the heavy foliaged trees, keeping out every gleam of light and sunshine and every breath of air. We could hear the roaring of the Black River, the hissing of the waters as they surged up from the Devil's Basin at Hell's Glen. The place was like a tomb. I could not believe there was any life there; but a feeling like the clammy presence of spirits made me shiver and

turn cold. We passed round by the courtyard—a dilapidated place—and there we saw a human creature. It was old Owen Glendower hewing and nailing together some black planks which, he informed us, he had found cast ashore after last week's storm. Papa spoke to him, protesting against such work being done on the Sabbath day; but he grinned until his face looked like a spectre's. "And yet, look you now, 'tis goot work, Dr Chepstow," he said; "Sabbath-day work too! I'm making these timbers into a cover for Mr Richard's tombstone!" As he spoke he pointed to a dusky corner in the courtyard, and we saw, resting against the rain-sodden wall, a marble tombstone! I was shocked, I must confess; then curiosity overmastered me, and I walked forward to look at the thing. It was a

pure white marble slab, ornamented with a jet black cross, and bearing the inscription, "Richard Glamorgan, born July 17, 18— died—" I had just completed my survey when a voice in my ear said,—"Look you now, Miss Chepstow, there be room enough left below for the name of Mr Richard's *wife!*" and turning, I beheld the old man grinning at my side. "Is this Mr Richard's purchase?" I asked, pointing to the ghostly thing; but old Owen shook his head. "Nay, nay!" he said. "Mr Richard be none so thoughtful as to do a thing like that—that was bought by the old gentleman twenty years gone, and only came home last night!" I was about to speak again, when an interruption came from another source. A hound, doubtless awakened from his slumbers by the sound of voices, crept from his

kennel, walked with velvet tread across the yard, and, sitting down beside the tombstone, uttered a dismal howl. The horrible old man raised his hand as if to strike the poor brute, but I checked him. "Leave the dog alone!" I said. "It is punishment enough for all his misdeeds that he has to live *here!*"

She paused; but for a time Alice said nothing. She had crept a little nearer to the fire, and with her cheek resting upon her hand, gazed meditatively at the blaze. Sitting so, she spoke.

'Of course the place is gloomy now,' she said; 'how can it be otherwise? Out of some twenty rooms, only two or three are furnished; all the pretty gardens have become wildernesses of weeds, and the whole of the mansion is in a state resembling an ancient ruin; but you seem to forget, Marion,

that there is such a thing as change. An hour ago this room looked perfectly desolate; I applied a match to the rosined wheel, and it changed to what you see!'

Marion smiled sadly.

'And so by the touch of a magic wand, as it were, you are going to transform Plas Ruthven?' she said.

'I shall try.'

'And its master. Is he to remain as he is,—dark, gloomy, distrustful, and sad?'

'Ah, that I do not know! I do not care for *him* to change, Marion, so long as his love for me does not die!'

Marion rose, for she heard the hall clock strike one.

'Good-night, Alice,' she said, kissing her sister. 'Get to bed, dear; we have been chattering far too long.'

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE WAY TO THE HAUNTED WELL.

AT nine o'clock the next morning Alice awoke. The first glance around told her that her room had already had a visitor. The blind was pulled up to admit the sunlight, the window was slightly open to let in the fresh morning air, and the flowers, which, during the night had stood outside her window, were now placed by her bedside. She seemed to feel the scent from them coming to her nostrils, and when she looked at them she saw that they were fresher

than ever, and bedewed with drops of rain.

She closed her eyes again and lay for a moment in a half dream. It was pleasant to feel the sunshine, the morning breeze, the scent of flowers. They seemed to bring with them the assurance that the misery and discontent of the day before had been but phantoms which vanished before the brightness of the morning sun. But she had slept too long to allow of much time for dreaming. Nine o'clock had struck; everybody in the house was astir, and it was time she too was moving. She rose, dressed herself, and ran downstairs, carrying her gloves and parasol in one hand, her hat in the other.

If it was pleasant upstairs it was infinitely more so down; every door and window was thrown open, every sun-blind

pulled down, there was a mingling of warmth and shadow everywhere, coupled with the scent of flowers and newly-mown hay. Alice went into the parlour, where she found her breakfast laid out. While she was taking it, her sister came in.

'What! dressed for walking so early?' she said. 'Where are you going, dear?'

Alice looked up with a bright smile.

'Did I not tell you last night? I am going to Glen Ruthven. Richard and I intend to dip our hands in the Devil's Basin and try to read our future fate!'

Marion looked at her sister with a strange, puzzled expression in her eyes.

'Is this his idea or yours, Alice?'

'How can you ask?' returned Alice reproachfully. 'Do you think anything so frivolous and childish would have occurred

to *him?* I proposed it, and he consented, just to please me.'

She did not like to add that the proposition made by her in a thoughtless moment had since been regretted very bitterly: that the fear of again seeing upon her lover's face that terrible look which she had learned to dread, had made her hold tenaciously to her word, and had, moreover, invested the whole proceeding with a seriousness and terror which, in her saner moments, she would have laughed at.

'What folly!' said Marion.

'Of course it's folly,' returned Alice. 'You have only said what we both think; but when two people are in love with one another, foolish things are permitted, you know.'

And then, as if to prevent the conversation from going further, Alice rose, and,

after promising to join her father and sister at their mid-day meal, set off to meet her lover.

She found him waiting for her; he, too, looked as if the sunlight had brightened his troubled soul. As he came towards her, there was a smile upon his lips and in his eyes; his kiss seemed warmer, his clasp more tender than she had ever known it before. In a moment all her misgivings vanished. She took his arm, and walked with him contentedly towards Glen Ruthven.

Not far from the village stood a gate-keeper's lodge, opening to a desolate avenue of trees. The lodge was desolate and deserted — covered with gloomy creepers, and surrounded by weeds, and there was no gate to the avenue. Directly the avenue was entered, the gloom of Plas Ruthven fell upon the pair. On

every side stretched woodland and shrubberies which had once been carefully cultivated, but were now wild as the virgin forest. Great boughs met over the avenue, and beneath grew weeds and coarse grass. A heavy roar was in the dark air. The river, rushing close by, buried deep in foliage, hurried to the sea.

Well did Alice know that gloomy avenue, for she had often trodden it when a child —creeping with her sister into the woods in search of flowers. Even then it had seemed to her a dreary place. Often she had stood, and gazed with timorous eyes at Plas Ruthven itself—a great ugly building, backed by walled gardens, which had once been brightly laid out and gay with human faces, but which were now tended by one aged gardener, and faced by gloomy lawns, sloping to the lonely river.

And she had wondered how any human beings could have dwelt in a place so desolate.

Then the heir had returned, Alice had fallen in love with him, and suddenly it seemed to her as if every place had been illuminated by the shining of the mid-summer sun. Even Plas Ruthven partook of the splendour, and was, to her at least, transformed.

The shortest path to Glen Ruthven lay through the woodland, and past the very door of the dreary dwelling; this path was taken by the lovers, and half-an-hour after they had started they stood together amidst the long rank grass right in front of the dwelling. Here everything had been suffered to run wild. The flower beds, once elegantly laid out, were choked with wild vegetation, magnificent

rhododendrons being mingled up with great nettles and luxuriant foxglove bells. The lawn was rank and damp, and blotted with yellow weeds. All round the dark trees gathered, while the great facade of Plas Ruthven, blotted with damp, stared out with ominous windows on the surrounding gloom.

During the walk very little had been said by either of the lovers; but to Alice at least the time had passed pleasantly, for all around her was so still and peaceful, and the man who walked by her side was the one being for her in all the world. But when she stood before Plas Ruthven everything seemed changed; no single gleam of sunlight penetrated here, and the air was too cheerless and too sad.

'It is a very dreary place,' she said.

'Dreary enough,' returned her companion

gloomily; 'a strange place, too, for a young girl like you to elect to spend her life in.'

She looked up curiously at him. He was looking at her. What a strange expression his eyes had! How his mouth was working, and with what a vicious grip his hand held hers!

'Plas Ruthven was not always as it is now,' she said.

'No!'

'I have heard papa say as much. When he first came here, twenty years ago, Plas, Ruthven was the gayest spot in the village. He has passed through the woods at midnight, and seen every window in the house illuminated, heard the sound of gay music and laughter reverberating through the forest and fading out to sea. The stables held a fine stud of horses in those

days, the kennels a pack of hounds, and you yourself, then a little boy, mounted on a pretty pony, used to gallop with your father's friends along those stretches of sand.'

'Your seem wonderfully well up in my family history; but why recall all this just now?'

'Just to show you that a dreary place need not always remain dreary. When we are married the people here shall think that the old times have come back again. Plas Ruthven shall be so transformed.'

She paused, and for a time there was silence. She was looking at the house; he was looking at her. Presently the very intensity of his gaze drew her eyes to his face.

'What is the matter?' she said; 'what are you thinking of now, Richard?'

He smiled, and took her slender hand in both of his.

'I was wondering, Alice,' he said quietly, 'what you would say to me, if I told you that all these brilliant visions of yours could never be realised; if you learned that in linking your lot with mine you would be passing as it were from sunlight into shadow; in short, if I told you, that in marrying me you would be compelled to inhabit Plas Ruthven as it stands, and become the wife of a comparative beggar!'

He paused, but she did not answer him. Her lips had turned quite white, and the hand which he held in his was tremulous and cold.

'What do you mean?' she said presently, forcing her lips to speak.

'I mean this, Alice—that when you

plighted your troth to me you espoused all these things. I have scarcely a penny in the world.'

Again he paused, but this time the white lips upon which his eyes rested remained closed, firm as marble, to the hue of which they had changed. It was to Alice as if she had received a blow which had stunned her, but had not made her stagger; as if the sunlight had suddenly faded before the bursting of a winter storm. She stood still, feeling the nervous pressure of his hands, the keen glances from his eyes, but nothing more.

'Alice,' he said, bringing his dark face close to hers, and throwing his arms about her, 'I am not what is commonly called a good man, but to-day my better angel seems to have got hold of me, and I feel I must be candid with you. We are quite

private here; no one will disturb us, and if you will listen I will tell you what you ought, I suppose, to have learned from my lips several months ago.'

He kept his arms around her, and drew her to a garden seat, roughly designed and quaintly fashioned, which was placed on the lawn near the dark front of the building, and taking his place beside her, spoke again.

'Since you know so much of my family history,' he said; 'since you have learned so much that passed here when I was a mere child, I have no doubt you know that eleven years since, when my father died, leaving me an orphan, everything that he had passed unreservedly into my hands. I thought I was a rich man that day, Alice, and the life which I had mapped out for myself was very similar to the one which you just pictured. I said to myself, "I

have no need to marry for money; I will choose a woman whom I can love and who will love me; we will make our home at Plas Ruthven; we will brighten up the dreary dwelling, and sow peace and plenty all around." But that was a dream, and soon to be dispelled. In less than a fortnight I learned that the property which I had inherited was heavily mortgaged. My father had done this—the money had been needed to help to pay the expenses which were so lavish in his house. The discovery was a blow to me; but, nothing daunted, I at once set to work to think what was best to be done. My lawyers said, "Retrench; turn away half your servants, shut up half the rooms, and in a year or so you may be a free man!" I thought over the idea, and finally discarded it; it was not in my line. Swifter methods

were more to my taste, and I espoused them. I could not take up my abode in Plas Ruthven alone. Until I could live in it as my forefathers had done, I determined to travel, and, if possible, make the travelling profitable to me. To travel was easy; to make travelling profitable was more difficult. But after long pondering, many inquiries, and much work, I gained my end. I procured an appointment in India, the income of which would enable me to clear the Plas Ruthven estates in less than five years.'

She listened quietly, but did not utter a word; he cast a sad look round him and proceeded,—

'The preliminaries settled, I made my intentions known, and received the condemnation of most of my friends. None but my lawyer, and those immediately

concerned in the mortgage, knew the real cause of my going out, and my conduct was looked upon as the mad freak of a hair-brained young idiot, who, having inherited a fair estate, seemed determined to let everything go to ruin and bring disgrace upon his father's name. I don't wish to lay claim to superhuman virtue, neither do I wish to impress upon you that at any time during my thirty-one years of existence my conduct has been saintly: it has not. I have had my faults; grave, dark, heinous faults, like any other man; but I do affirm that at that period of my existence I was not much worse than half-a-dozen of the kind of men whom the world is told to honour. But the verdict of the world was against me in a measure, and that sent down the scale. My nature was gloomy and taciturn; they called me sullen

and vindictive; hard, cruel, callous and cold; but I was no more any of these than—well, than *you* are! Times have changed since then—man is what he is made, not what he is born; and although, on the whole, I think I was meant to be a tolerably good fellow, humanity has changed me into what I am!'

He paused for a moment and looked at the girl who sat so quietly beside him. She had crept a little nearer to him now, and her hand, still cold and trembling, lay like a cold rose leaf in his burning palm; her lips had regained some of their usual colour, and her eyes, so full of sad questioning, were gazing fearlessly into his. What a contrast, what strange overwhelming odds, between those two! he so strong and dark and powerful, she so strangely sad and small!

'Into what I see?' she said smiling; 'are you then a very sinful man?'

'Listen a little longer and you shall judge. Well, Alice, I went to India; but before going I came to spend a fortnight at Plas Ruthven. I loved the place,—and coming to it was like paying one last visit to old and valued friends. I spent a fortnight here, and during that fortnight I experienced as much sorrow as joy. To be alone in a house which you have always associated with happy faces and joyful sounds; to revisit in solitude and sorrow place after place which recalls to your mind the happier past, and shows you the future painted in darker colours than it has ever worn before,—all this is not pleasant. Such an ordeal was mine. Day after day I experienced fresh anguish, new regrets. I was not sorry when the time came for me to

go. On a bright sunshiny morning I started on my journey, full of hope for the future, and thinking with a certain sadness of the past. "In a few years," I said to myself, "I will return. Then the time will come for rejoicing. I now renounce my birthright, and until I can fill my place, as it should be filled, I will keep away!"

'Yes?'

'I had left my affairs in pretty good order, so that nothing should trouble me while I was away. Our family solicitor had the charge of everything. He wanted me to let the place, but this I declined to do. I curtailed the expenses as much as possible, and arranged to make what I could without the degradation of letting. Most of the things which were of any value,—all the family plate, the family jewels, and several other valuable family

relics, were removed from the house, and left in the custody of my banker. All the servants were dismissed, save two—old Owen Glendower and his wife. These two being the very oldest and most valued servants in our family, I retained, and left to take charge of the house during the time I intended to be away; these, together with a gamekeeper who was to preserve, kill, and sell the game, were the sole retinue left at Plas Ruthven. Well, my work prospered—at the end of five years the mortgage was paid off; I was a free man, and the unconditional owner of Plas Ruthven.'

Again he paused, and again the girl, growing very interested now, raised her eyes inquiringly to his face.

'That was six years ago!' she said.

'Yes, that was six years ago.'

'And you did not come home? I have never heard that at that time you came to Plas Ruthven!'

'I did not come. My work was done, but that for which I had striven had no longer the power to please me. The woman whom I loved refused to inhabit the house with me; so its charm for me was gone!'

Alice started with a quick shiver of pain.

'The woman whom you loved!' she cried.

A hand of iron gripped her, making her shudder from head to foot. Very quietly she regained possession of her hand, and withdrew a little further from her companion's side. A fiery sword seemed suddenly to have come between them and cut them asunder. Until that moment Alice had scarcely realised how great her love

had been. And yet, while feeling so,—while her strong inclination was to thrust him away,—she inwardly forgave him every harsh word which he had uttered. His anger had always been aroused by jealousy; and now, for the first time in her life, she began to understand what that passion meant.

'Alice,' he continued, turning his gaze upon her flushed, pained face, 'I have a strange tale to tell you, my darling,—a tale that will make you either hate or love me. God alone knows why I have elected to tell you this to-day. I suppose some of the old honesty still clings to me, and prevents me from doing anything which might bring harm to you. Well, Alice, at the end of five years, when I might have returned joyfully to my home, I found myself held captive in another country,

rendered utterly powerless — bound hand and foot, as it were, by the light from a woman's eyes. It was my first experience of the passion, and I plunged into it heart and soul. She was an Englishwoman, a sort of Lady Teazle, who, after having been reared in country innocence, had married a wealthy man, and ruined him in three years, just half the time she took to ruin me! When I met her, she had been separated from her husband for some time, and, having outrun the constable, having in short lost all her ruined husband's money at the gambling-table, had come out to India on speculation, hearing, doubtless, that female beauty was at a premium there, and that there were plenty of young fools, with more money than brains, whom she would find willing to replenish her stock. Having looked about her, she fixed her

eyes on me and marked me for her victim, and I, fool that I was, readily fell into the snare. She played the part of the sorrowful injured wife to me, until, what with love and pity, I grew like a raving madman. Home, friends, everything was forgotten. One day, in a wild frenzy of passion, I threw myself at her feet, avowed my love, and awaited her condemnation!'

'You did not think she loved you?'

'Whether or not, I expected to be condemned, for what was I that for my sake she should espouse dishonour; so I bowed my head before her, and said, "Thrust me from you, I deserve it; but I have spoken —my heart is relieved! Oh that you could kiss me, and with that kiss kill me here at your feet!" So I remained. When I raised my head, I saw that her face was crimson, her eyes full of tears, her trembling

hands outstretched towards me. She was a wife already, she could not marry me, but she consented, through her great love for me, to become—my mistress!

'Such was my state of mind at learning my good fortune, that had she demanded it, I would have made her mistress of everything I possessed. This being so, I considered her demands were moderate. All she asked was that I should at once, out of my income, settle upon her the sum of five hundred pounds a-year, to be hers unconditionally for the remainder of her natural life; that the said five hundred pounds was to be in no way used for household expenses, but that apart from, and beyond it, I was to keep her in a manner befitting her position in life and my own.

'I acceded to these demands readily, joy-

fully; compared to her sacrifice the price seemed small. The money was made over to her unconditionally, and on the day that the deeds were signed, I presented her with a gorgeous set of diamonds — our family jewels—which had been put aside for my wife, but which I had had sent over from England to present to my mistress! My compact being fulfilled, she held to hers; enriched with the family jewels, the five hundred pounds, she came to the house which I had provided—to all intents and purposes, my wife!'

'Alice, what is the matter?' he continued, suddenly breaking off his narrative; 'why, my darling, you are crying!'

CHAPTER VII.

THE JEALOUS ARE THE DAMNED.

SHE was indeed crying. Not wildly, passionately, boisterously; her lips were quivering, that was all, her eyes were full, and great scalding tears coursed slowly down her cheeks. While he had been speaking, she had withdrawn herself further and further from his side, and now she sat on the very edge of the garden seat.

She had been sitting thus for some minutes, when the pause in his narrative aroused her; she wiped away her tears, and turned her white face towards him.

Glamorgan had risen from his seat, and stood now on the spongy weed-covered lawn facing the girl. His face usually so hard and stern, had assumed a wonderfully soft expression; his eyes were fixed, not upon her, but upon the desolate mansion of Plas Ruthven.

'I have spent many happy days here,' he said, as if communing with himself; 'but I don't think I ever experienced a pleasanter sensation than I feel at this moment. Strange that the woe of one should be another's blessing, yet so it is. I have lacerated your little heart, Alice; my words have been sharp enough to draw forth tears, and the knowledge of this makes me rejoice. It seems to purify the air about me; it seems to bring to my darkened soul snatches of revivifying light, it seems to whisper in my ear,—"At last your search

is ended; truth, love, and above all, faithfulness, lie at your feet; accept the reparation which has been made to you, and be at peace!" Peace, peace—shall I ever find peace?—will my troubled spirit ever be able to rest again? Shall I ever again be able to place my faith in woman's love? No, no; wherever I look dark shadows arise and trouble me; my faith is always shaken, my love blackened and distorted, cast back to the source whence it sprang! Alice, my darling,' he continued, again taking his seat beside her, 'I have a story to tell you yet, but first, let me help you to dry your tears!'

He passed his handkerchief across her eyes, and kissed her tenderly; then regaining possession of her hand, he held it in both of his.

'I won't prolong my story; it nauseates

you, and no wonder, for now that all is over, and I look back upon the past, my very soul revolts. Well, to resume. Helena and I lived together for several years. She refused to come to Plas Ruthven; urging as her excuse the manner of our life, and the pain she would have to endure if she came to England, and could not be acknowledged by my circle of friends. I saw reason in her excuse, and let her have her way. So we remained abroad, travelling from one place to another, and behaving like millionaires. Helena was extravagant in her tastes, and she had a way of charming the money out of my pockets, which was characteristic. During the first three years she received, instead of the stipulated five hundred, at least double that sum, besides numerous costly presents which she admired and I bought,

just for the pleasure of making her look happy. This could not last long; I was spending four times my income; at the end of a few years I found myself literally a beggar. Plas Ruthven was again mortgaged—every acre of it; the family jewels now belonged by right to Helena; all the family plate, and everything of any value had been sold to help us; and now, besides the dilapidated walls of Plas Ruthven, and the few articles of furniture in the house, I had nothing left in the world. I determined to make a clean breast of it to Helena, and after that consult with her as to what it would be best for us to do.

'I had a hard struggle with myself before I resolved to tell her; it was the part of my troubles the most nauseous to me. To drag her into the petty troubles of pounds, shillings, and pence was to me

like casting a fairy into the gutter. Still, it had to be done, and as there was no help for it, I made the resolve, and cast about in my mind to see in what way I could spare her pain. The dreaded interview was postponed for days — days and weeks —to me a time of excruciating agony, both mental and physical, for beneath the weight of trouble I felt my health giving way. But at length the ordeal was forced upon me. The English mail came in, bringing me a batch of letters with ruin written like blood marks on every page. I had sent to my lawyer for money; the answer came telling me that it was impossible to raise a penny. Every available article had already been disposed of; Plas Ruthven was roof deep in mortgage; the advice I got was to atone for my past extravagance by reclaiming it. How was this to

be done? There was but one way, and for this I should require Helena's help. I had disposed of my letters, and brought my reflections to this point, when the door of my room opened, and Helena came in. She was in full evening dress, and wore my dead mother's diamonds; her start of surprise at my condition paved the way for what I had to do. She had entered the room, pushing the door to behind her: I closed and locked it, then returned to the place where she stood.

'"Helena," I said, "how much money have you got?"

'It was an abrupt beginning, but I felt that to plunge at once into my subject was the only chance I had. The first start of surprise over, Helena laughed, and said,—

'"What a question, and how melodramatically asked! It is like a highway-

man's stand and deliver! Is that what you would have?"

'"I suppose so!" I said, "for I haven't a penny in the world! I'm a ruined man!"

'And then, Alice, I told my story; laid the facts before her in all their naked truth, their hideous details; expecting every moment to see her come and sob out her sympathy on my breast. But she did not. When I had finished speaking she stood yet at her place near the table, looking like stone.

'"Well, dear," she said, when I paused, "what do you mean to do?"

'The question chilled me. It was as if she had taken a knife and run it through my heart. The means of action lay in *her* hands now, my powerful days were over. But she had evidently nothing to suggest, so I spoke on, making the

proposal which up till this I had fondly hoped would come from her. It was this—That she, having the right to draw from my ruined property the annual sum of five hundred pounds, should share that sum with me; that we, dispensing with all luxuries, should make this yearly sum cover our personal expenditure; that I, in the meantime, should work my hardest to pay my debts and clear the mortgage from Plas Ruthven. "And as soon as the estate is free," I concluded, "I will try to free you, Helena, in order that I may make you my wife and take you over to my home."

'I paused, she said nothing. I looked at her, she was whiter than ever, and the flashing of the diamonds at her throat, round her arms, and in her hair, showed her to me in a dazzling blaze. I approached

her, took her in my arms, kissed her cold lips, and whispered words of comfort; my words of love gushed forth in a wild stream, for I sickened to the heart when I thought that she suffered pain. But her lips did not kiss again; after a few moments of inanimation she freed herself from my embrace, and said, shivering, "I am too dazed to think now, leave me to myself to-night, dear; we will talk of this again in the morning," then with the faint ghost of her old smile, she left me, and I was again alone.

'The plunge was taken, but I certainly did not feel much relieved. The manner in which Helena had received my news rather disappointed me. That she was callous at heart, indifferent to my interests, I could not and would not believe, for you see I was an infatuated fool at that time,

and to believe any ill of Helena seemed to me nothing short of blasphemy. Still, I was not satisfied. I had expected her to be grieved, but I had promised myself the bliss of soothing her. She had deprived me of this comfort, robbed me of the only thing which had the power to brighten my ruined life, by shutting herself up alone. I walked up and down the room in a sort of stupor, thinking of the past, planning for the future. The fact that Helena herself was the sole cause of my ruin, the knowledge that her extravagance only had been the means of bringing me to this unlucky pass, did not occur to me, or if it did, the knowledge but came to darken my soul for a moment, then be crushed, as it were, trampled upon and cast away. The only thing which troubled me was the certainty that for

a time at least the luxuries which seemed to have become necessities to her, must be abandoned, and that I myself must become, as it were, a beggar at her door.

'I am not, by any means, a servile man; the Glamorgans have been noted for centuries for their stubborn pride, and in my veins their blood flows thick and fiery enough, God knows. A few years before that night, had I been told that I would one day become dependent on a woman's bounty, I should have hurled the lie back in the maligner's teeth, and kicked him for his pains. Yet that very night I had sued, as it were, for alms.'

'But you had not sued for charity? You had merely demanded back a portion of your own.'

The sound of Alice's hollow voice seemed

to recall him from a dream. He looked into her face with a strange smile.

'So that is the way you look at it, little one,' he said; 'well, nine people out of ten, blessed with ordinary feeling, would agree with you, I've no doubt; but, as I have told you, I was an infatuated fool at that time, and even now my ideas upon the subject are peculiar. I argued thus: In the days of my prosperity I had given Helena the money, and from the day when the grant was made, the money ceased to belong to me. In making my demand, therefore, I was certainly suing for bounty; laying myself under an obligation which I should never be able to repay; but, would you believe it, little one, the very thought of this obligation came like honey to me, for I thought that I should have a proof of Helena's love. Hitherto Love's professions

had been sweet to me, but how much sweeter would be Love's sacrifice. But in the end she should not suffer. Her sacrifice, her goodness, her trust in me, and love for me, would bind us together more strongly than ever. It should be my life-long task to repay her for her sacrifice a thousand fold, and to return her love with love a thousand times as strong.

'While I thought and argued thus the night wore away. Four hours had passed since Helena had left me, the clock upon my chimney-piece was on the stroke of twelve. Surprised and pained at her long absence, I went to seek her. Her door was locked. I knocked sharply three times, and at each summons I called "Helena." The door at length was opened by Helena's French maid. The girl looked flushed; her manner struck me even then as being

very peculiar, and she was dressed for walking.

'"Monsieur must excuse madame this night," she said. "Madame is ill. I have just been to procure remedies for her. Madame will see monsieur at nine o'clock in the morning, if he will refrain from knocking at the door or seeking madame in any way until that time."

'It was not the first time that Helena had been ill since we had come together, but it was the first time that I had been denied access to her room. She had been wont to say that my hands were the only ones which could smooth her pillows or support her aching head. Again and again she had denied herself to every one but me. This sudden change chilled me; but, in my eagerness to comfort her, I pleaded like a beggar at her door, and in

the end, pained and humiliated, I had to creep away.

'I will not trouble you with many more details, Alice; my story is almost done. That night seemed like a year to me. At nine o'clock in the morning I was again at Helena's door. Again I found it locked. I knocked, but got no answer. Once, twice, thrice my summons was repeated, still it was ineffectual, save to bring about me a crowd of gaping servants. The noise we made was tremendous, but no answer came. In my frenzy I vowed that Helena was dead or dying. We broke open her door, and found her gone! Yes, she had flown — taking everything she possessed with her, and leaving on her dressing-table this little note for me!'

He put his hand into his pocket, drew forth a stained and crumpled paper

opened it, and held it towards his companion.

'Would you like to read what Helena said?' he asked. 'Here, Alice, are her very words.'

He held forth the note, but no hand was outstretched to take it. Alice sat before him, looking as lifeless as stone; a terrible struggle was going on within her, which at last she overcame. She took the note from his hand and read it. It ran thus:—

'MY DEAR RICHARD,—Ever since I have known you I have believed you to be a rich man. If you have lived beyond your income you have only yourself to blame. I have never been accustomed to poverty, and cannot share it. The money which, thanks to my own forethought, I am still

possessed of, is enough for one, but insufficient for two. You are a man, and can make your way in the world. I am a helpless woman, and must look to myself. Adieu! With much love and regret,

'HELENA BANYARD.'

Having read the letter, Alice crushed it in her hand, and thrust it back into her lover's palm. Then she rose and walked feebly away.

'Alice,' he cried, 'where are you going?'

'I am going home.'

CHAPTER VIII.

ELEMENTAL OMENS.

DURING the first half-hour Alice had been experiencing feelings which seldom come twice during a woman's life. Jealousy, a passion hitherto unfamiliar to her, had seized her and was scorching up her soul. She loved the man, and yet she hated him; she felt impelled to kiss, and to strike, him. She did the very best thing in her power when she walked away. She had not gone a hundred yards, however, when her lover's arms were round her.

'Alice, my darling!'

She struggled wildly to get free.

'Let me go, sir! How dare you hold me! I tell you I wish to go home!'

She turned her face towards him. It was pale with passion. The teeth were clenched, the eyes flashing. She was a frail little thing compared to the tall, muscular, broad-shouldered man who held her, yet at that moment, so keenly had jealousy stung her, she looked capable of resisting him to the utmost.

As Glamorgan looked at her his eye brightened. A look of fierce pleasure and contentment softened his features. There was a smile round his mouth and in his eyes. He held her firmly in his arms and wildly kissed her.

'Alice, don't struggle, don't give way to your passion like this. I have more to tell!'

'But I will not listen. I do not wish to hear another word.'

Again she struggled to get free, but he held her firmly, exhorting her to be calm. His efforts were successful. Her passion having spent itself, tears came, and with them the inclination to cling to the man who held her so fondly to him. He led her to the seat again, and still holding her by both hands, continued his strange tale.

'You must hear the end, Alice,' he said; 'having endured the torture, you must submit to the process of being healed. Well, when I read that letter it affected me for a moment, much in the same way as it has affected you. For four-and-twenty hours I was like a raving madman, then my reason returned, and with it a terrible thirst for revenge. I know no

medium in my feelings, and my hatred for Helena was now a thousand fold as powerful as my love for her had been. During those twenty-four hours my eyes had been opened. Now that the blow had finally fallen, there were dozens to tell me that for years I had been befooled; that Helena, having been habitually unfaithful during the six years that we remained together, had capped her crimes by flying with a young officer, who had been a constant visitor at our house! I followed them, intending to kill them both. I spared the woman, but I challenged her lover, and stabbed him, as I thought, to the heart.'

Alice started and turned paler than before.

'You *killed* him?' she said.

'No,' he answered; 'I did not kill him —do not start little one, do not look so

horrified and pale. Thank God, I am not guilty of the crime of murder! The wound which I inflicted was not fatal; the poor devil recovered, and returned to the arms of the woman who had caused his woe and mine. I would not take revenge upon Helena, but I vowed to myself that I would have reparation. In my own mind I determined that a woman should be the instrument to heal the wound which Helena had made. All my estates and money were gone. I resolved to marry a woman whose fortune should restore both. The course which I had planned, and which seems to me now both despicable and mean, I then believed to be just. I had fully determined in my own mind that my love for and faith in woman were gone for ever, having once been tampered with, crushed, and

wounded. I felt that I could never again set up in my soul the ideal which I had once worshipped,—never again look upon a woman's face with any degree of pleasure. Nevertheless, I said to myself that I should be justified in making use of a woman for the purpose of re-establishing the old house and the old name, which Helena had done her best to destroy. On this principle I determined to act. But before my work began I felt I must satisfy an inward craving which I had had for years to see Plas Ruthven. I came home. How well I remember that night! It was the return of the prodigal son without the episode of the fatted calf, the happy forgiving faces. I came to my home without a soul to recognise me or give me welcome. It was a bitter cold night towards the end of last January. There had

been a heavy snowfall, and the roads were almost impassable. Nobody seemed to be about, so I had the village pretty much to myself. As I plodded along towards Plas Ruthven, I passed by the door of the vicarage. The lights were up, no blinds were drawn, and, as I was passing along, my eyes, which had been carelessly surveying the building, suddenly became fixed upon a figure which occupied one of the rooms. Surely it was pre-ordained that you were to be my salvation, for as I stood there that night, gazing for the first time upon your face, sickened, saddened, crushed, and almost heart-broken, I felt a sense of relief and happiness steal over me, which seemed to allay my pain. You stood before the fire, Alice, with your hands clasped behind you, your eyes sadly looking upward, joining in a hymn which your sister was playing on

the harmonium. I could see the firelight playing on your hair and sending lights and shadows across your face. You were looking upward then, my darling, just as you are looking upward now!'

The girl smiled faintly.

'I remember that night,' she said; 'I was in the house alone with Marion; papa had gone to the village to see a man who was dying. I had been very restless and a little nervous all the evening, and as I stood singing (I remember it so well) a man's shadow seemed to come between me and the moonlight, then, when I looked round, it disappeared. For a little while I was so frightened I could not move; then I summoned up courage to go to the door. No one seemed to be abroad; the snow was lying thick on the ground and the wind was wailing; that was all!'

'So I began by casting a black shadow upon you!'

'It must have been your shadow cast into the room by the dim moonlight. I have never said anything about it; but I have always wondered until now!'

'You are satisfied now?'

'Satisfied?'

'And yet,' he returned slowly, 'if your story were to be made known, superstitious people would tell you that you had still cause for fear. The shadow has been succeeded by the reality. It may be preordained that I should bring you nothing but sorrow!'

She looked up at him with grave earnest eyes.

'You believe that?' she said.

'Do I believe?' he repeated. 'Alice, I am a man who believes in nothing—to look

beneath the surface is my motto now; to stifle blind belief with cold unbelief, until all things with a fair surface have been severely tried. You cannot know the full value of an untested jewel. It is the same in all the issues of life, the great as well as the small.'

Silence came upon them again, Alice, gazing at the cold dark forest all around her, was dimly thinking of all that had passed before that day. While she remained silent she had crept nearer and nearer to her lover's side, slipping her cold hands into his, and feeling in his presence a certain kind of joy. Suddenly she drew back.

'Richard,' she said quietly, 'shall you continue to doubt *me* all your life?' . . .

His eyes were fixed upon her; his fingers closed convulsively upon her hand; but he said nothing.

'You did cast a shadow upon me that night,' continued the girl quietly; 'it was the shadow of suspicion and distrust which has always kept us apart. Sometimes I have said to myself, "If he would only test my love, he would have no further cause for fear!"'

He gripped her hands still tighter.

'You would not be afraid?' he said.

She looked at him with wondering eyes.

'Why should I fear?' she said.

'Because,' he answered, 'if you were to falter or fail—God help you! God help us both! . . . Alice,' he continued, bending towards her and taking her face between his trembling hands, 'I have told you how I loved Helena Chester,—I know now that my love for her was child's play compared to what I feel for you! She plunged me into darkness,—you raised me

again into the light; you have become my second self, and sooner than find you false as she was, I would, much as I love you, strike you dead with my own hand!'

'And yet you doubt me! You have always doubted me! I have never once looked into your eyes and found complete confidence and love!'

'You have not found confidence, for whenever I look into your eyes I seem to see the shadow of that woman, and then my trust vanishes like light before the rain. That shadow pursues me! that woman seems destined for ever to drag me down, but in spite of it all, I love you!'

The girl looked at him quietly, and said,—

'I have heard that a man's first love is stronger than any which he is likely to feel if he lives for a hundred years; until to-

day, I believed that your first love was given to me!'

'My first and best, my darling! I never knew what love was until I saw you!'

He stretched forth his arms towards her, but the girl quietly put them away.

'Your first love was given to that lady. If you felt for her what you have said, it seems to me that you could never love again!'

He looked at her in silence for a time, then he quietly took her hand.

'Alice, do you doubt *me?*'

'And if I do, I think you will own that I have some cause. If I had told you a story similar to the one which you have just told me, I wonder what your feelings would be at present?'

For a moment his face was strangely distorted; he forcibly took possession

of her waist and held her to his side.

'That would be a different matter!'

The girl said nothing more, but she did not return the pressure of his hands. Presently she rose and began again to walk away. This time she walked into the woodlands, taking the narrow footpath which wound among the trees and led towards the glen. The man did not attempt to detain her, but followed her closely.

Several hours had passed since she had left her home; the sun was now at meridian heat, and all the earth was basking beneath its rays; but not a ray penetrated the dark trees of the forest. The ground was very spongy to the tread, and the heavily foliaged branches which intertwined overhead shut out every glimpse of sunlight and blue sky.

They emerged from the forest, and for some time followed the highway, which wound through low green hills. Sometimes a country cart, or a farmer on horseback, or a peasant woman in a huge Welsh hat, passed by, but otherwise the road was deserted. Presently, passing through an iron gate, they crossed a field; while so doing they could hear the roar of water in the distance. Quiting the field by another gate, they left the sunshine, and again entered the shadow of the woods. As they went the roar of the water grew louder. The path which they pursued led to the brink of a woody chasm, down in the depths of which the river cut its way through solid granite. Over the chasm stretched a wooden bridge, crossing which, they found a precipitous path leading right down to the side of

the roaring river. The girl clung to her lover as they descended. The roar deepened till her head was dizzy. Then reaching the bottom, they came out on a slab of black iron-stone, and stood at the foot of foam-white falls.

They paused for a moment to look up and listen: then holding each other's hands tightly, for the rock seemed to shake beneath them, they gazed into the black pool which bubbled in a rocky basin at their feet.

On either side of the basin rose massive rocks and trees of sad-coloured foliage, which mingled their thick branches above the water, as if determined to exclude every gleam of revivifying light. Hitherto the lovers had clung together in silence: now Glamorgan spoke.

'Alice, give me your hand!' he said.

She started, turned towards him, and,

without a word, laid her cold fingers in his palm. For the last half-hour or so Alice's wish to try her fortune in the Devil's Pool had increased tenfold, not for the sake of proving her love, but of testing that of the man who stood by her side. She had forgotten all about Philip Kingston, the ring, and the picture; it was the memory of Helena Banyard which now filled her mind. She put her fingers into her lover's palm, then shrunk back in fear. How his hand was burning! She looked at his face, and saw that his features were convulsed,—his face wearing that expression which she dreaded. Her own heart sank, but she forced her cheek to smile.

'We are two foolish creatures to have rushed into such a position as this,' she said; 'do not let us carry the folly further. Richard, come away!'

She made a movement as if to depart, but his fever-burning hand griped her fingers more firmly. He laughed.

'Now that we are here we will dip in!' he said. 'Come, Alice, do not be afraid. Let us take the test together!'

This time the girl said nothing, but quietly knelt beside her lover on the ironstone slab. They bent over the deadened water of the pool, and thrust in their clasped hands. No sooner had they done so than a faint cry escaped the girl's lips. The sunlight faded, the wind blew, the elements seemed disturbed. Glamorgan's fury clasp was loosened and Alice set free!

For a moment she knelt alone on the rock; then her lover's arms were around her.

'Alice, my little darling! he said, 'the water lies! In spite of it all, you are going to be my wife!'

CHAPTER IX.

DRIFTING ASUNDER.

FOR three days after that strange scene at Glen Ruthven the lovers did not meet. Alice, pale, silent, and pre-occupied, seldom passed beyond the vicarage gates, while Glamorgan remained within the dreary walls of Plas Ruthven.

There was no one to notice this but Marion Chepstow, and she, having since her sister's engagement been seldom in the habit of seeing much sunshine in her face, said to herself, 'It is another of their lovers' quarrels,' and deemed it prudent to leave

matters alone. But her resolution did not last. Three days passed; Alice grew more silent, more pre-occupied and paler than ever; and at last her sister, noting all this, deemed that the time had come for her to interfere.

The resolution was taken on the afternoon of the third day, as she was walking home alone in the slowly-gathering twilight. By the time she reached home it had resolved itself into a fixed determination to force an explanation from her sister, and if possible bring this sinister engagement to a close.

She had left Alice sitting in the drawing-room, the girl having declined the invitation to go out, saying that she had a headache, and dreaded the warm rays of the sun; so of course she anticipated no difficulty in finding her on her return. On reaching the

house she walked straight to the drawing-room, and found it empty. She searched the house and the garden in vain; she inquired of the servant, who knew nothing. Then she went upstairs to take off her things, and solved the mystery. Her bedroom window commanded an extensive view of the sea-shore. She saw two figures walking amicably side by side upon the sands. She recognised her sister and her lover.

'The mountain would not come to Mahomet, so Mahomet must needs go to the mountain,' she said; and the expression of her face was not altogether pleasant when she descended the stairs again.

In her conjectures Marion was wrong. Alice had not run after her lover. The meeting had been brought about thus: The

moment Marion had left the house that afternoon, Alice, grown weary of holding before her eyes a book, the pages of which were to her nothing but blank paper, had cast the thing aside, and, with her hands clasped behind her, had walked restlessly up and down the room. She was still pursued by the demon which had haunted her for three days past—the shadow of Helena Banyard; and her heart was still troubled with forebodings, which she had never been able to shake away. 'He loved that woman,' she said to herself, 'and if she were to cross his path he would love her again.' Then she fell to wondering what had kept him so long from her, and she could devise no better reason than that his heart had gone back to the woman to whom he had at first given it, and he therefore no longer felt an irresistible desire

for the companionship of the one who loved him *now.*

Alice certainly loved the man, and her love for him was even greater than she herself could understand. She would have forgiven him any crime save that of having loved another woman, and, worse still, of being possessed of so little discretion as to have failed to keep the knowledge of this love to himself. Alice had not even the satisfaction of knowing that she had been the woman's successful rival. No, Helena had had her day, and had been herself the means of bringing that day to a close. She had sucked her orange dry, and had cast aside the refuse for whoever cared to take it. It had fallen at the feet of Alice Chepstow, and she had accepted it, and in her ignorance been content.

This was the view which Alice now

took of the affair; it was not a pleasant view, and small blame could therefore be attached to her when she felt inclined to undervalue the love which was hers at last. She reviewed the dark scene at the pool; the memory of it only added to the suspicions which had taken so strong a hold upon her. She had superstitiously persuaded herself by this time, that while her hand had been beneath the water she had distinctly felt cold fingers unloosen her lover's grasp and set her free.

Of course it was all folly, and in her sane moments Alice would have acknowledged as much; but at this period of her life the girl was not sane. Jealousy, suspicion, superstition, and distrust had taken possession of her, and had changed her as it were into another being. Added to all this she had no one to whom she could

open her heart, for her lover kept away. This was the cause of the change which her sister noticed in her, and which puzzled her so sorely.

Alice walked about the room until she was tired, then she passed through the glass-door out on to the lawn. It had been very hot all day, but now the sun was sinking to rest, twilight was beginning to gather, and the heavy dew which fell upon the earth seemed in a measure to cool the heated air. It was certainly very refreshing, and, after one or two turns up and down the lawn, Alice felt that the air was pleasant. It seemed to brush away the cobwebs from her brain, and disperse all the morbid fancies which of late had troubled her. She began to regret now that she had not accepted her sister's invitation to go

with her to the village; 'but,' she said to herself, 'I will make amends by going to meet her; but first I must see that papa is all right.' With this intention she approached the house and peeped in at the library window. There sat Mr Chepstow at his desk, busily at work upon his Sunday sermon, and with a pile of letters, which the four o'clock post had brought, lying near his right hand. Alice knew that with so much work before him he would not stir for two hours at least, so, without saying a word to any one, she quickly re-entered the house and ran upstairs to equip herself for walking. Her toilette was soon made, and she descended the stairs with light noiseless step, and passed unseen out of the house. She would have passed out of the gate also, but at this point she came face to face with her lover.

Glamorgan had intended to enter the vicarage garden; the sight of Alice, dressed for walking, made him pause and ask whither she was going.

'I am going to the village to meet Marion!'

'Does she expect you?'

'No.'

'Then come with me. I must be with you alone to-night. Take my arm, Alice; we will walk along the sand by the sea.'

Utterly bewildered, but feeling a strange sense of happiness begin to steal over her, Alice allowed him to take her hand upon his arm and lead her away. They walked straight to the shore. Glamorgan glanced around him, no living soul was visible; he turned to Alice and took her in his arms. He held her to him passionately; he kissed her lips, her forehead, her hands, until

the girl, more bewildered than ever, pushed him away.

'Don't do that, Alice,' he said quietly; 'those are almost the last kisses I shall have for many months to come.'

The girl looked at him strangely.

'What do you mean?'

'I am going out to China, Alice, and the ship which takes me will put to sea in less than three days.'

At these words the girl's heart seemed to turn to stone; all the forebodings, which for the last three days had troubled her so sorely, returned tenfold. It seemed to her that the black prophecy of the magic well was already beginning to be wrought out. She held out her hands towards him, and cried with a piteous moan,

'Oh, Richard, if you have any care for me, do not go away.'

CHAPTER X.

A LONG FAREWELL.

THIS sudden exclamation affected him very strangely. At first he was pleased, and his pleasure was revealed by the sudden illumination of his face, for his heart seemed to say, 'She loves me, and dreads to part,' then the light faded from his features; his face clouded, for the devil whispered in his ear, 'She is as unstable as the wind; it is the knowledge of her own weakness, not the sorrow of being separated from you, which makes her dread this parting.'

Distrust and suspicion had become a disease with the man. Having once taken hold of his vitals, they retained their hold; he could no more help doubting than the sun can help shining. He tried to exorcise the demon, but it wrestled with and subdued him. It convulsed his features, agitated his frame. It made him pace the sand in agitation, then pause before the girl and hold forth his hands.

'Alice,' he said hoarsely, 'put your hands in mine, and swear before God that you will never marry any man but me!'

Alice raised her eyes and stared at him in mingled amazement and fear; she had had her own thoughts, her own doubts, her own dark forebodings. She was still thinking of Mrs Banyard, so she said,—

'No, I will not swear that. If you were

to become untrue to me, I should not consider myself bound!'

His face clouded for a moment, then it brightened. He folded his trembling arms about her and held her to his breast.

'You think that I could be untrue to you?' he said. 'Oh, my darling, how little you know me; neither the inducement of all the pleasures of heaven, or the fear of all the tortures of hell, could make me false to you!'

'Since that is so,' she returned quietly, 'why have you come to tell me that you are going away?'

Then he gave her an account of his doings for the last few days.

It amounted to this, that he, so far overcome by his love for Alice as to perceive the cruelty of marrying her, and condemning her to a life of poverty and dulness,

had resolved to improve his position, as far as lay in his power. With this idea he had gone to London to consult his lawyer. The old man, delighted at the prospect of a change in his friend's mode of life, and anxious to do all in his power to aid him, had immediately set to work to see what could be done. He was zealous, and his zeal was rewarded; he worked for a day, and by the end of that time had achieved what he considered wonderful success. The young man, calling at his office on the third morning, was met with the news,

'I have a post at my disposal which only you could fill,—and which would yield you fifteen hundred pounds a-year. Will you take it?'

'I have no doubt of it; but the conditions.'

'First, that you live in Canton, at least

so long as you wish your income to last; and next, that you sail from Southampton in five days from this. Neither of these conditions are unsurmountable to a man in your position!'

'Insurmountable? No; but they are certainly not easy to comply with. I do not wish to go abroad!'

'But you want money, and situations in England are not lucrative to men like you! It will broaden your ideas as well as fill your pockets!'

'Then, again, I did not wish to start so soon.'

'A mere whim, my dear fellow—a mere whim. You have only to pack you portmanteau and go on board. Take my advice, and don't throw away such a chance too hastily. Sleep over it, and come to me with your answer at nine o'clock to-morrow morning!'

Glamorgan took this advice. Punctually at nine o'clock the next morning, he walked into the lawyer's office to accept the Chinese appointment.

There was a great deal to be done before he could sail; many of his affairs to arrange, and much to talk over with the lawyer. The old man proposed that they should begin forthwith, but Glamorgan declined. Now that he had decided to go he wanted to get back to communicate his intentions to Alice; but before leaving London he had promised to return at least two days before the one on which it was appointed that the vessel should sail.

Having heard him patiently to the end, Alice sat for a moment regarding the silent sea; then she turned her face towards him, and he saw that it was pale with emotion and wet with tears.

'Richard,' she said, 'I do not mind your being poor—I do not mind living with you in a desolate half-empty house like Plas Ruthven; but you must not go away and leave me here alone!'

At first he was startled, then he gave her the advice which the lawyer had given to him, to sleep upon it, and tell him in the morning whether or not he ought to go.

The next morning her views upon the subject were certainly very much changed. Still she would not urge his going; but she had come to regard it with rather more tolerance. She did not now say, 'Stay with me!' She only said, 'How long are you likely to be away?'

The fact is, on the previous evening she had spoken to her sister, told her the exact state of affairs, and asked her advice. As Marion had never favoured the match when

she believed Glamorgan to be tolerably rich, she favoured it still less now than she knew him to be poor.

'By all means let him go. His very wish to improve his position before he marries you, is the one gleam of good that I see in him!'

Then she had pointed out to her sister the kind of life she would have to lead if she married Richard and poverty, until Alice, terrified at the picture, was thankful that her persuasions on the night before had been of so little use. It was certainly a dreadful thing to send her lover to China; but there was consolation in the thought that the pain of parting was only the forerunner of years of happiness.

Glamorgan had two days to spare, and most of each was passed with Alice. Despite the pain of parting, Alice thought she

had never known a happier time. He was so genial to her, distrust seemed to have vanished, and in its place was unparalleled confidence and love. And because he was so genial and kind, Alice made various demands which he had to accede to. The first was that at the utmost they should not remain parted more than two years; having made him agree to this, she gradually decreased the period to one year; then she made him promise that if the place where he was located was at all fit for her to live in, he would return at the end of nine months, marry her, and take her back. Having brought matters to this state, Alice was perfectly contented. Nine months would soon pass, she thought, and after all to have to live in China was perhaps no worse than being compelled to become an inmate of Plas Ruthven.

Meanwhile time sped on, minutes changed to hours, hours to days, the utmost limit of Glamorgan's stay had been reached, and the time had come for him to go.

All the morning the lovers had been together, revisiting their old haunts. They had wandered along the shore, across the limitless stretches of sand; they had entered the quaint little church, and, kneeling before the altar, they had clasped each other's hands, and sworn never to desecrate the love which bound them, by letting it fade or die. They had gone to the Devil's Pool, and standing there amidst the shadow of the forest, the roar of the falling water, they had clasped hands and exchanged love symbols, as dozens of others had done before; and, looking down into the water they had tried to read the mystery of future years. But the water flowed

from cascade to basin, and so on from rock to rock down the bed of the winding stream, revealing nothing; and all around it was blackness, death, and decay, but not a single gleam of light. Was it an augury? Alice feared so. She still remembered with dread the touch of the cold hand which had loosened the clasp of her lover's fingers, and set hers free. She looked up to speak of these things, then looked down again in silence. Her companion had his retrospects, and they were not of the pleasantest kind. He thought 'She stood here and tried love spells with another man, just as she has tried them with me. If, in passing from her sight, I were to become like the rotting leaves in the forest, she might forget me as she forgot him.'

At three o'clock the lovers parted. Alice returned to the vicarage, Glamorgan to Plas

Ruthven, to complete one or two arrangements which he had to make before he could go away. Two hours' work completed all he had to do,—then, having given one last lingering look at the old place, he walked up to the vicarage to say farewell. The servant, without announcing him, showed him at once into the dining-room, where he found the two sisters sitting hand in hand.

He saw at a glance that Alice had been crying, and even Marion looked sad. She rose immediately upon his entrance, and, saying something about going 'to tell papa,' walked quickly out of the room, leaving the lovers alone. She found her father in his study, busy with his books as usual, and quite forgetting the affairs of this world in the limitless problem of the next. On hearing of Glamorgan's arrival, he rose

at once to go to him, but Marion put her hand upon his arm.

'Perhaps we had better stay here,' she said; 'there will be plenty of time for us to say good-bye when he has taken leave of Alice.'

'Very well, my dear,' said Mr Chepstow, and resumed his seat.

They sat there for fully an hour; then Marion heard the dining-room door open quickly, emitting a murmur of voices, mingled with sobs and tears; then the door closed again. She hastily stepped out of the library and met Glamorgan in the hall. He looked very much agitated, and pity for his pain rather than sorrow for his loss, made her clasp his hand more warmly than she had ever done before. She murmured 'Good-bye,' then leaving him to her father, she hurried into the dining-room to her sister.

She found Alice crying, so violently, so hysterically, that she could neither speak nor hear. The violence of her grief rather surprised her sister, who had always imagined that Alice would certainly lead a more tranquil life without her lover than with him. The truth of the adage, 'A blow from the hand of the man we love is sweeter than a flower from the one we love not,' seemed to be here proved singularly true. Alice was inconsolable for the loss of the one man who had had the power to cause her so much pain.

So Alice cried on until her strength was quite exhausted, and all the time her sister did what she could to console her. But Marion was by no means easy in her mind. Though she tried to console, she could not sympathise with her sister. She ould not share such sorrow; indeed, she

knew that her soul was relieved, now that the man was gone.

When Glamorgan reached London that night St Paul's was striking twelve. He hailed a hansom and drove at once to his hotel. His first proceeding was to order supper; then he followed his luggage to his room, washed, and changed his clothes, —a process which was very necessary after a railway journey of seven hours. Having completed this, he pulled from his portmanteau a little leather writing-case, and prepared to write a letter to Alice.

It was the first time that he had sat down to write a love letter, since the impassioned notes which he had been wont to pen to Helena Banyard, and as he sat with the paper before him, the pen in his hand, and the words, 'My darling Alice,'

staring him blankly in the face, recollections crowded upon him which paralysed his hand and clouded his brain. A tap at the door brought him to himself again. Thrusting down all recollections of his past, and concentrating all his thoughts on the present and the future, he applied himself to his task, and soon finished the letter. It was written, folded, enclosed in its envelope; it only wanted sealing. He had both sealing-wax and matches, he searched his case for a seal. There was none there! Having searched the pockets of his coat, he inserted his fingers in the pockets of his waistcoat. In the right-hand pocket he found nothing, but in the left his fingers came upon something hard; he pulled it forth, expecting to see a favourite seal, but he found it was a ring.

A little hoop of gold, decorated on one

side with three jagged holes, which looked to him like the sockets of three orbless eyes. Before that hoop was battered, and when those rayless holes had been filled, with three glimmering sky-blue stones, he had seen that ring decorating Alice's finger. The mere recollection of this sent over his face a look which Alice always knew to be the fore-runner of violent storm. He was glad that he had written the letter: he could not have written it now. That plain little hoop of gold was like burning fire. It burnt his hand and withered up his soul. He tossed it on to the floor, and, having closed and locked his bedroom door, went down to walk off his excitement in the moonlit streets.

CHAPTER XI.

INTRODUCES A HIGHLY RESPECTABLE FAMILY.

WHEN he awoke in the morning he looked for the ring which the darkness of the preceding night had hitherto concealed from him. It was lying near the dressing-table, glittering in the sunlight. He picked it up at once, and, as soon as he was dressed, he opened Alice's letter and put the ring inside. Then he went down to breakfast.

He had sketched out his movements for that day, and every hour was occupied. His first care, however, on going out, was

to post the letter. This done he congratulated himself. To return the ring had cost him a struggle; the struggle had ended in victory, and he was well pleased.

He had posted his letter at Charing Cross; he at once hailed a hansom and drove straight to Chancery Lane. He alighted on the pavement before a very musty, dirty-looking doorway. He entered and ascended a flight of narrow, worm-eaten stairs, which were so old and so decayed-looking they seemed as if they would collapse before the first firm well-planted foot, and crumble to decay. However, he ascended them in safety. Having done so he found himself standing on a small piece of oil-cloth, surrounded by several doors. All the doors were closed but one; this was thrown wide, and revealed to the new-comer about half-a-dozen very tall stools,

and about half that number of desks. At these desks were several very seedy-looking clerks of all ages, who, with bent heads and rounded shoulders, were writing away as if their very lives depended upon their swiftness, while a step or two nearer to the door was a tall, pale youth with straw-coloured hair, who lounged with crossed legs, and hands lying idly in his pockets, and stared at Glamorgan through a pair of double eye-glasses.

Glamorgan asked if Mr Tremaine was at the office.

'Yes,' drawled the youth, as if he were trying to what possible length the monosyllable could be stretched. Then he strolled over to a desk and got a piece of paper, having done this he strolled back again and asked the gentleman's name. By this time all the clerks had ceased

writing; all their heads were up, though their shoulders were not straightened, so Glamorgan had about six pair of eyes fixed upon him now, instead of one. Glamorgan gave his name, and, after another prolonged stare, the youth began very leisurely to write it down. To his amazement the pen was suddenly taken from his hand, the name written, the paper handed to one of the clerks, and an imperious order given to take it at once to Mr Tremaine.

'If you can afford to fritter your time away, I can't,' said Glamorgan; 'look sharp, my man, or I shall make bold to announce myself.'

The indolent youth, too vapid to get angry, stared in stupid amazement, while the seedy clerk, having taken the slip of paper to his superior, returned to conduct in the stranger too.

Having followed his guide up another flight of narrow worm-eaten stairs, Glamorgan found himself standing before a door, on which the word 'Private' was marked in very black letters indeed. The door yielded at once to pressure, and he found himself in another room. This room was slightly smaller than the one the clerks occupied, slightly colder, slightly dirtier, and a good deal more uncomfortable. It was full of square tin boxes, labelled, 'A. Langden—dec'd. Estates of D. Llewellen,' and so on. Amidst this heterogeneous collection, seated before a table, which was piled up with letters and deeds, was a little old man, dressed in very threadbare clothes, and with his feet wrapped up in furs.

This was Mr Tremaine, who had taken in hand the management of the Glamorgan estates some twenty years before the present

heir was born, and whose father and grandfather had managed them before him. He had procured Richard his Indian appointment, and now got him his China one. He had no soft sentiment about him, but he had several times rescued his client from ruin, even in his own despite, and what he had done, not once but several times, he was quite willing to do again. His one business wish in life was to right the Plas Ruthven estates, and, before he closed his eyes, to have the satisfaction of seeing them unembarrassed, and in the hands of their proper owner. With this view he had paid off all the mortgage money, and become himself the sole mortgagee; but fearing that Richard, whom he regarded as a gloomy ne'er-do-well, would be inclined to encroach were the whole truth known, he kept the matter a strict secret, even from his daughter, and continued

to talk of people as entities, whom he alone knew to be myths. So far, this double dealing of his had done no good. He had regularly received the percentage due to him on his mortgage money, and had been as exacting as any stranger could be, always giving as an excuse for his own extortion the penurious character of the mythical mortgagee.

The fact is, he had very little pity for Glamorgan; a man who could squander away his money as he had done, and, at the capricious bidding of a woman, ruin a valuable estate, deserved no pity in his eyes. He had other motives for wishing to reinstate him in his proper position. These motives of his will soon become known.

When Glamorgan entered the office room the old man rose, kicked aside the furs with an energy that belied his years, and

welcomed him most cordially, then, having invited Glamorgan to take a seat, he resumed his own.

'I can only give you a quarter-of-an-hour,' he said, glancing at the clock on the chimney-piece. 'You ought to have dined with me last night.'

Glamorgan was well aware of the fact, —he had been all along; but the temptation of dining with the Tremaines had been insufficient to draw him from Alice. He did not mention this, however, and business went on. At the end of the fifteen minutes they had settled a good deal, but as much more remained unsettled. The lawyer rose, however, and pronounced the interview at an end.

'Come to my house at half-past six to-night,' he said; 'we shall have the evening before us, and can discuss these things at

our ease. When I'm at home I usually throw off the shop, as you know, but I don't mind departing from my rules for *you.*'

The two men shook hands. Glamorgan walked towards the door, he had just gained it, and was about to pass out when the voice of his companion arrested him.

'Glamorgan,' said he, 'you are bent on going to China, I suppose?'

The question was a curious one, coming from such a quarter. Glamorgan looked amazed, then he reminded his friend that, so far from being bent upon going, he had, for four-and-twenty hours, persistently refused, and at last, through the urgent advice of Mr Tremaine himself, he had consented to go.

'But you came to me for advice; you wanted to do something?'

'I wanted to turn myself from a homeless wild beast into a man again.'

'Humph! to speak more plainly, you want to disembarrass Plas Ruthven.'

'Precisely.'

'And if you could do this without going abroad, you'd prefer it?'

'Of course. I have reasons—very strong reasons—for not wishing to leave England just now; all my nature revolts at going. I fought with and conquered my feelings, but the struggle was hard.'

The old man screwed up his eyes and looked keenly at Glamorgan, noted his athletic shape, grim face, and shapely head, then he again glanced at the clock.

'Come to me at half-past six to-night,' he said, and, with a wave of his hand, dismissed him.

Precisely at half-past six o'clock that

night, Glamorgan alighted on the pavement opposite the door of Mr Tremaine's private residence, a large double-fronted but dreary-looking mansion in Bloomsbury Square. The door was opened by a man-servant who had all the manners of a mute. This worthy welcomed Glamorgan with a cold clerical bow, and having escorted him along a dimly-lighted passage, ushered him into a dimly-lighted room.

Glamorgan was almost as familiar with this room as he was with the desolate-looking apartments at Plas Ruthven.

Ten years before, when he was preparing to go to India, he had spent a month in London, and during that month he had lived almost entirely with the Tremaines. He had ridden in the Row with the lawyer's daughter, a marriageable girl of about eighteen; he had joined the family

dinner-table at least three days a week; and, in polite recognition of the hospitality thus shown him, he had been in the habit of bringing the young lady bouquets, and of escorting her to places of amusement. Mrs Tremaine cherished the hope that such assiduous attentions were not idly given; but at the end of the month, greatly to her amazement, Glamorgan calmly said, 'Good-bye' to them all, and took his departure. Since that day she had never once beheld him.

On being ushered into the room Glamorgan had taken a look round to see if there was any one to welcome him. Having ascertained that there was not, he scowled at himself in the glass; then he sat down, turned his face to the open windows, and looked at the smoke-begrimed square. He wore evening dress, and he

had probably never looked better in his life. Those few words which Mr Tremaine had uttered in the morning had awakened in him a wild hope of happiness and freedom, and such hope always improves the looks of a man. Besides this, he had in his pocket a letter from Alice Chepstow; a letter written half-an-hour after he had left her; the very first one which she had written to him, precious to him on that account, as well as for the tenderness, truthfulness, and love with which it was filled. He had placed it in the inside pocket of his coat, and with his left arm he persistently pressed that part of the coat to him. It seemed like a part of her; he could almost believe that he could feel her breathing and hear her voice, mingled with the moaning of the sea.

'Mr Glamorgan, how do you do?'

While Glamorgan had been plunged deep in thoughts of the past, the door had opened and a lady had entered the room. A lady by no means young or fair. Her figure was tall but very thin; her features were not uncomely, but her face was colourless, its expression hard and somewhat bitter. She had black hair, which was neatly dressed, and she wore a black dress of an exceedingly plain cut. She looked forty—her age was only twenty-seven—and when Glamorgan had left for India ten years before she had been a pretty brunette. Seeing that her entrance was unnoted, she stood for a moment and looked at the man; her face was almost bright when she spoke.

'I am glad you have come,' she continued, leaving in his palm the cold, thin hand which he had pressed so warmly.

'It is quite pleasant to welcome back such an old friend.'

Suddenly her manner changed; something in his face turned her into the hard, cold woman again, as she said,—

'You find me much changed, Mr Glamorgan?'

'My dear Miss Tremaine, ten years is long enough to work changes in us all.'

She seated herself, and for a time the two continued to chat about old times, but some strange barrier had come between them which neither could remove. Presently the lady rose and walked restlessly about the room, while Glamorgan relapsed into his former silence, and allowed his thoughts to wander again to the little Welsh village by the sea; to the blue-eyed, fair-haired, Welsh girl who was sitting in the vicarage, thinking most probably of him.

Meanwhile Dorcas Tremaine, moving restlessly about the room, was experiencing a sickening sense of pain. When Glamorgan had left for India ten years before, Dorcas, after having quietly wished him 'Good-bye,' had crept back to her rooms in the mansion in Bloomsbury Square, and looked around her with a heart as sad as if she had been looking at the dismal trappings of a tomb. She had tried very hard to preserve her secret, and up till that moment she believed that she had preserved it; but Mr Tremaine, who seemed to note every change of expression on his beloved daughter's face, soon discovered everything. Had the loss of half his possessions been of the slightest use to allay her pain, the old gentleman would have made the sacrifice. But he knew it would be useless. Simultaneously, with the knowledge of his

daughter's love for Glamorgan, came the discovery of his marriage. But now the woman was dead; the lawyer believed that Glamorgan was a free man again. He knew also that his daughter had but one ideal—Richard Glamorgan; but one month out of all the years of her life to think and dream over—the month which had been spent with him.

When Dorcas Tremaine had entered the room that evening her heart had been at very high pressure indeed, but she had controlled herself sufficiently to walk up to the visitor and give him her hand. She had noted the look of gloomy pleasure which, at sight of her, had lighted up his stern, dark features; she had felt the lingering, tender pressure of his hand; then something had come between them which had allayed the painful throbbing at her

heart, and impelled her to walk uneasily about the room. A long silence ensued; then, to the girl's immense relief, her father came in. The dinner passed gloomily enough; as soon as it was over Dorcas Tremaine was glad enough to withdraw and leave her father and his guest alone.

CHAPTER XII.

GLAMORGAN MAKES HIS WILL.

PRESENTLY the two men went up to the lawyer's study,—a cosily fitted up room, the privacy of which was secured by two substantial green baize doors. The lawyer took a comfortable chair, and pointed to another, which Glamorgan refused.

'You have got some English appointment to offer me?' he said, standing before the old man.

The lawyer screwed up his eyes and watched his companion through the lashes.

'Wrong,' he said curtly. Glamorgan started.

'I understood this morning—'

'Certainly you did not understand that, or if you did, you made a mistake. But, before we discuss the advisability of your stopping at home, let me point out to you the folly of your going. Your salary out there will be fifteen hundred a-year; if you live on five hundred, and send home ten, it will take you at least ten years to free Plas Ruthven!'

'A bankrupt estate cannot be saved in a day!'

'Certainly not; still, when a man has reached your age, ten years of hard work and exile are not pleasant to contemplate. Now, I know a plan—one that has occurred to me since I suggested your going away, —by which you might disembarrass Plas

Ruthven in four-and-twenty hours, and have at your command means sufficient to live in the house as your ancestors did before you!'

'And the terms?'

'Are what nine men out of ten would grasp at—the companionship of an affectionate wife.'

Glamorgan stared,—then he turned on his heel with a petulant laugh.

'You refuse?' asked the lawyer.

'Of course. The suggestion came to me, and was refused by me several months ago.'

The lawyer smiled.

'Of course, and very properly rejected,' he said; 'because you thought you would have to find the lady, and, having found her, to awaken her interest in the match. There was a hard task before you then, but

suppose I told you that the task was over, —suppose I could show you a lady, young and tolerably comely, who liked you well enough to marry you, and whose father would disembarrass the estates the day she took your name?'

'I should still refuse,' he said. 'And now, Tremaine, that the farce is over, let us get to business, for the ship sails to-morrow at noon!'

The conversation, however, had so excited the lawyer, that it was some time before he could bring himself to that state of composure necessary to his task. At length he conquered himself and set to work, and while he worked he wondered to himself,—'There is something at the bottom of all this obstinacy,' he said to himself. 'What can it be?'

In half-an-hour the business was over,—

so at least the lawyer thought; but Glamorgan had another request.

'By the way, I want to make my will!' he said.

Immediately the lawyer was all attention.

Glamorgan proceeded to explain. He had very little to leave,—only two hundred a-year,—Plas Ruthven Manor House and one or two little personal legacies.

The whole of these he bequeathed to Alice Chepstow. Then came the reservation which staggered even Tremaine. 'To remain the property of the lady aforesaid for the term of her natural life, if she continues to retain her maiden name; but should she marry she is to forfeit her right to everything, and the property will pass to the next of kin.'

The cunning lawyer put all this down without a word of comment. When the will

was signed, witnessed, and sealed, and the two men were alone again, Tremaine quietly, and as if carelessly, asked the *age* of the lady in whose favour the will had been made.

Glamorgan fell into the trap at once.

'About eighteen,' said he.

Then he produced from the breast-pocket of his coat a painted miniature, and handed it to his companion. The picture represented the head and shoulders of Alice Chepstow, but so greatly had it been etherealised, that it might have been taken for the picture of a virgin saint, or a Madonna from an early Italian painter.

Tremaine looked at it: at the dimpled cheeks and chin, the pouting lips, the hair falling upon the shoulders like golden rain, and the dreamy blue eyes, half veiled with their sleepy lids and long dark lashes.

As he looked his eyes grew like steel;

his jaw set. The face had no charm for him, for it represented to him the mortal enemy of his only child.

'And so,' he said, without looking up, 'this phenomenal young lady is going to wait ten years for you, is she?'

Glamorgan shuddered.

Ten years from Alice! As well put him at once in his grave!

'God forbid!' he said. Then he explained to the lawyer the compact that had been made. With knitted brows the old man listened.

'So,' he said, with a grim smile when the tale was done,—'if the young lady comes into your money at all, she will do so before this time next year?'

'Of course. If I live, by this time next year she will be my wife.'

'And if you die, by this time next

year she will be somebody else's sweetheart!'

The lawyer spoke in a quiet though emphatic tone; the answer was hurled back at him like a thunderbolt.

'It is false!' Glamorgan said. 'Do not belie her!'

Tremaine started slightly, but in a moment he grew as composed as ever. His cheek was a shade paler, perhaps, and his lips more tightly pressed together, but he threw himself back in his chair and watched his companion from beneath the drooping lids of his eyes. Glamorgan was walking excitedly up and down the room: he paused before the lawyer's chair.

'Tremaine, I beg your pardon.'

The lawyer smiled grimly.

'Not at all, my dear boy; not at all. You are in love, you know!'

'Which is no excuse for one gentleman to be rude to another; but your remark annoyed me. And so you really think,' he continued, taking a seat before his companion, 'that if I die, Alice's love for me will die also?'

'I am sure of it. It would be a physical impossibility for it to survive! My dear Glamorgan, when I was twenty years of age I was as romantic a youngster as you would find on the face of the earth. I was inclined to do what you have done to-night, — to select a back unfitted for any burthen, and say "bear *this;* if you fail for lack of the strength which has never been supplied to you, you shall suffer." Well, my period of romance has passed away, and I find myself very much better without its distraction. Common sense guides me now. If I wanted a van

load of iron drawn into the city I shouldn't put a gracefully formed delicate-limbed race-horse between the shafts; or if I did I should curse my own stupidity, not the pony's weakness, when the poor brute broke down half way!'

'Pray, explain your simile. I don't see the application.'

'It is this, my dear fellow: if you wanted to put such confidence in a girl, who could be widowed as it were at eighteen, and who would (as you hope) possess stability enough to mourn through a long life a man whom, after all, she had only known for a month or so, you should have chosen one with a different frontal development, that is all. As well look for figs to grow upon a grape vine as to expect superhuman strength of character coupled with a face like that!'

So saying, he laid the miniature upon the table, and Glamorgan, taking it up, replaced it in the breast-pocket of his coat.

'Shall we go down to Dorcas?' asked Tremaine at length, seeing that his friend seemed little inclined for further conversation.

Glamorgan started like one awakening from a dream.

'I am not fit company for any one to-night,' he said; 'you can say "good-bye" for me!'

'As you please; you start to-morrow, I suppose?'

'I believe so!'

'You will let us hear of you from time to time, and see you at the expiration of the year. God bless you, my boy!'

The two men shook hands. Tremaine

descended gloomily to his drawing-room, and Glamorgan left the house.

There was little pleasure left for the lawyer that night. He sat apart in silence and watched with sorrowful eyes the face and form of his daughter. She was moving restlessly about the room watching for a form which he knew would not appear to her again. And as he looked, there appeared before his eyes a vision of Alice Chepstow, as she had been represented to him in the picture, fair-haired, blue-eyed, delicate skinned, looking into her lover's face with a happy, contented smile.

'Pest upon the girl,' he muttered; 'would to God she had been strangled at her birth, since she comes to cast such a blight over the life of my darling child!'

Meanwhile Glamorgan, having got clear of the house, walked slowly through some

quiet streets, to think over the conversation which had just taken place. He still had Alice's letter in his pocket; he still pressed it lovingly to his heart,—but the words which the lawyer had uttered had stung him to jealousy again.

On arriving at his hotel, he found that the postman had been again, and had left him another letter. Again he recognised Alice's hand. He carried the precious document up to his room and sat down to read it.

'I must write to you once more,' wrote Alice, 'because, while I am writing I try to imagine that you are near. The place is so desolate without you! I walk on the sands; but the sea has no music for me now, the washing of the waves is only the dreary moaning of water which is destined to take you from me. I sit at home,

and the rooms look desolate,—the only one which seems like home to me is the one which holds your portrait, love. I stand before it many hours a day, and when I look up your eyes look down so gravely upon me and your dear lips seem to say, "Do not weary, Alice—my spirit is with you always; yet a little while and I shall come and claim you for my own!" I think you have my ring, dear Richard—if so, keep it. I have sent Oscar to Mrs Kingston of Mostyn Towers!'

As he read these last words Glamorgan's face grew woefully dark, and a spasm contracted his heart. It quickly passed away, however; he folded the letter and put it in his pocket as he muttered reflectively,—

'These foul suspicions sully her honour and mine. If I were to put her to the test,

—no man could ever accuse her, and I should never doubt again!'

. . . . . .

He left London early the next morning, and sailed in the ship which quitted Gravesend at noon.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WEDDING DRESS.

JUST six months had come and gone since that day when Richard Glamorgan, bright in his own fashion with hope for the future, said 'Good-bye' to Alice, and left her to wait for him in the little vicarage by the sea. Six long weary months, which had seemed to the girl like six years.

The sunlight had faded from the earth, the sea had turned to a steel-like grey, the trees, stripped of their foliage, bent pitifully before the biting breath of the chill

November wind. It was cold, cheerless weather. Winter had come on early, and its approach had been heralded by one or two black frosts, which had swept over the land like a breath of desolation, to take all hope from the heart of man. Such weather brought hard work to every one, especially to the inmates of the vicarage. Mr Chepstow and Marion had to plod about all day on errands of charity amongst the poor, and Alice was equally hard worked at home.

But the last day of November, which had come round so quickly, found Alice shut up in one of the rooms at the vicarage, with the village dressmaker working busily at the dresses which were to form her wedding outfit. She had been working very hard for several weeks, and the close confinement, together with excitement and

anxiety, were beginning to tell upon her; her cheek was somewhat paler than usual; her figure had grown even more slender. In vain had Marion protested that time did not press; in vain had she pointed out the fact that many long weary months must surely elapse before the gloomy owner of Plas Ruthven could return to ask Alice to wear his bridal ring. The girl's restless excitement must be worked off somehow, and she deemed this the simplest and surest way.

A room had been set apart for the dress-making, as its condition would show. Fabrics of various hues were piled upon sofas, tables, chairs; a full-length toilette mirror occupied one side of the room, while the sewing machine—the busy hum of which was heard from morning till night—occupied a prominent place in the window. The hum

of the machine had been more persistent than ever one day; but, as the shadows began to lengthen it ceased. The dressmaker rose with a weary sigh.

'There, Miss Alice, that be done,' she said, holding up a dress of delicate white satin. 'It be pretty enough for any lady in the land, but a mint o' money wouldn't make *me* put it on.'

Alice, who had been brought from her work at the other end of the room, looked up at the speaker in dismay.

'Not put it on, Marjorie?' she said. 'Why, what is the matter with it?'

'The matter? Nothing in the make; nothing in the cut, nothing in the stuff. I've made for many proud ladies in Ruthven in my time, and none of 'em ever wore a better gown. But 'twas begun on a Friday, and 'tis finished on a Friday, but you would

have me do't, so when ill-luck comes don't blame Marjorie Doves.

For a moment Alice was silent. Her lover's ways had made her superstitious, and a horrible foreboding chill crept through all her veins, making her shiver.

'It is my wedding dress,' she murmured; then resolutely shaking off the feeling of dread which had seized her, she added, 'I will not listen to such nonsense; papa has been preaching against superstition for five-and-thirty years.'

Nevertheless, she would not have another dress begun that night; but because the all-important one was finished, she gave the dressmaker an extra glass of Marion's cowslip wine, and an extra shilling when she said 'Good-night.'

The girl gone, Alice locked the work-room door, and went downstairs to see

that the rooms were cosy for her father and Marion, whom she looked for every hour. In the kitchen she found all trim and neat —no signs of work or disorder; the floor and tables were as white as milk, a blazing fire filled the polished grate, and on the hob was singing a copper kettle, which the maid was keeping ready for the tea. Well satisfied with this inspection, Alice went up to the dining-room. Here again she found cosy comfort, cleanliness, neatness, and warmth. The table was spread for tea, a merry crackling fire filled the grate, two cosy-looking arm-chairs were drawn towards it, and Mr Chepstow's embroidered slippers were placed in readiness for him on the goat-skin rug.

The evening was creeping on quickly; the light in the room was dim. Alice lit the lamp which stood upon the table, and

drew the maroon curtains across the windows to shut out what was still left of the light of day. Having done so she took up a shawl, wrapped it round her head and shoulders, and walked out into the road to see if she could see anything of her father and Marion.

What a contrast the cosy rooms in the vicarage were to the bleak and wintry chilliness of the night! It had been cold all day, but since sunset the air had grown quite bitter. There was a bleak wind blowing; the roads were bound hard with ice; the sky loomed chill and threatening overhead, and thin flakes of snow had begun to fall. With her warm shawl wrapped well about her, she walked quickly up and down the hardened ice-bound road; gazed at the frozen earth about her, the blackened sky above.

'I wonder why it is,' she said to herself, 'that I feel so wretchedly out of myself to-night? I wonder if anything is going to happen? I wonder if any one is going to die? I did not like to tell Marion, but during the last three nights I have been persistently awakened from my sleep by the piteous moaning of a dog! . . . I wish Richard would write. It is so long since I heard from him, or it seems so long to me.'

The thought of Richard made her turn her eyes towards the home which he had asked her to share. The moon had risen just above it, and looked down from between the clouds of the troubled sky. How dreary the place appeared! The trees bereft of all foliage, the grounds sinking into decay, and the turrets blackened with tempest, and the weary rolling on of

years. She gazed on. So lost was she in contemplation of the wretched-looking place, that she had not noticed the quiet approach of a man, who now stood within three yards of her.

'Good-night, Miss Chepstow.'

With a start she turned quickly, and found herself face to face with the village postman, a rough-looking Welsh lad of eighteen, whose duty it was to bring in the letters night and morning from the post office, which was in the village of Abergelly, just three miles away.

'Good-night, Owen. Any letters?' she asked, rather eagerly, after her first start of surprise was over.

'Yes, miss, three.'

'Give them to me, and go into the kitchen. You shall have a glass of our new ale; it will do you good on such a frosty night.'

Gleefully enough the lad handed her the letters, together with Mr Chepstow's London paper, which came down every night; then turning his bag round on to his back again, he followed the young lady through the wicket-gate into the vicarage garden.

Alice walked in like one treading on air. She hurried into the parlour, spread out the letters on the table beneath the brightly burning lamp, and looked at each in turn. How blank her face became! They were all addressed to her father! One, she knew, contained an invitation to a clerical meeting; the other his quarter's salary; the other was directed in a hand which she did not know, but on the seal she read 'J. Tremaine & Son, solicitors, 143 Chancery Lane.'

Compared with the all-important one which she had expected, these letters con-

tained little interest for her. She gathered them up and laid them near her father's plate, together with the paper, which contained his entertainment for the night; then she filled a horn full of ale, and carried it herself to the kitchen.

She found the post-boy seated comfortably beside the clean, cosy hearth. His post-bag, cap, and stick lay upon the kitchen table, and he himself, while warming his hands, was gazing in wrapt admiration upon the neat figure and comely face of the pastor's maid. Alice's hands gave the ale, but her eyes were eagerly fixed upon the post-bag.

'You gave me only three letters for papa, Owen!' she said.

'Three letters for his reverence,' returned Owen greedily, eyeing his ale; 'that be right, Miss Alice; but look ye, now, I had

the paper as well,' and he made for the bag.

'Yes, yes,' said Alice, 'I got the paper, but— isn't there a letter for me?'

Great as was her anxiety on the subject, she exhibited a certain shyness in asking the question—the shyness communicated itself to the post-boy and the servant girl, and for a moment there was a constrained silence. Then the lad said,—

'There beant one for you, miss!'

'No? Are you quite sure? May you not have overlooked it? Shall I take a glance just to satisfy myself, Owen?'

And without waiting for Owen's permission, she thrust her eager little hand into the canvas bag and drew forth its contents. A sorry lot—three letters in vari-coloured envelopes, bearing American stamps and addressed in scrawling un-

educated hands, to three inhabitants of the village who were known to have prosperous relatives abroad—two letters for Mrs Lubin, the landlady of the principal inn, and several foreign papers. With a quiet sigh Alice returned them to the bag.

'You must bring me one to-morrow, Owen,' she said with a smile; 'or there will be no more October ale,' and nodding good-night, she left the youth to the enjoyment of the ale, the society of the maid, and the warmth of the kitchen, while she herself returned to the parlour to await her father's return.

How late he was! the hands of the clock already pointed to seven, and the hour for afternoon tea at the vicarage was never later than four. If it had been Alice's good fortune to receive the long-

expected letter from her lover that night, she would have found the time pass swiftly enough; as it was, it dragged so heavily that she was puzzled to know what to do with herself.

At last she hit upon a plan.

'I will try on my wedding dress!' she said.

The idea seemed to be a humorous one; in a moment her face brightened. She went to Marion's store cupboard, opened a packet belonging to the goods which had come from London the week before, and drew forth four thick wax candles. Armed with these, she ran up to her work-room and locked herself in.

Her first care was to dispose of the candles; these she placed in various positions around her full-length mirror, and lit them all; then she collected together all the articles which were to form a

part of her wedding costume, and, having undressed, proceeded to array herself as a bride. First came the white silk stockings, with just enough open work in front to give glimpses of the delicate instep—the little white satin shoes, the lissome clinging white satin robe and the embroidered white veil which had covered her mother's blushing face, the day that Mr Chepstow, then a young aspirant to clerical fame, made her his wife. Slowly, tremulously, Alice arrayed herself in these things; then, when all was completed, she stood amid the flashing lights before the mirror to see the effect.

She started, blushed, and her face lit up with pleasure.

'How nice I look!' she said with pardonable pride. 'How pleased Richard will be when he sees me! I wonder if papa

and Marion have come home yet? Surely they have,—it must be nearly eight o'clock! I'll just creep down and walk into the dining-room to give them both a surprise!'

She gathered up her flowing lace-trimmed train in one hand, with the other held around her shoulders the delicately embroidered veil, and crept on tiptoe downstairs. With the same caution she entered the dining-room, but there was no one there. The maid had evidently been in to put more coal on the fire and turn down the lamp, but neither Mr Chepstow nor Marion had returned.

Having got down, Alice felt loath to go up again without having made her desired effect, so she turned up the lamp, threw out her skirts until they fell gracefully behind her, and stood for a time irresolutely upon the hearth. Presently, tired with

waiting, she went forward and looked again idly at her father's letters. Finally she took up the newspaper, tore off the wrapper, and began to glance carelessly at the columns which contained the news of the day.

She read on.

Suddenly she started, her face turned ghastly pale; with cold trembling hands she clutched the paper, sank upon her knees near the table, and proceeded with wild eyes to devour the paragraph, the first glimpse of which had evidently caused her much alarm.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SHADOW ON THE HEARTH.

IT was through no fault of Mr Chepstow that he was detained abroad that night. Though he was a conscientious man, and loved at all times to do his duty, yet he was not above enjoying such simple pleasures as were afforded to him in this world.

The four o'clock tea at the vicarage with his daughters about him was regarded by him as drifting into quiet waters after a troubled sea. Let the duties of the day be ever so onerous, he always comforted

himself with the reflection that at four o'clock Marion, who was the best of housewives, would be sure to surround him with home comforts, and Alice, the spoilt pet of the family, would sing to him, read to him, or smoothing back his silver hair and pressing her rosy lips to his brow, kiss away the wrinkles caused by the long day's care.

During his life Mr Chepstow had had his share of trouble, and his greatest trial had been the early loss of the wife whom he had held so dear; but it seemed to him that, during the latter period of his life, the blessings of God were rained upon him in large increase: every Sunday, as he stood beside the one beloved mound in the churchyard, and thought of the bright beloved faces at home, he turned his troubled face to heaven.

'The crosses of this earth are hard to

bear, but Thy mercy is great,' he murmured. 'Thy will be done!'

On the day of which we write, the clergyman's work in the parish had been arduous; but at four o'clock, wearied both in body and mind, he was fairly on the road towards home. Marion was with him: she had been down to the village on errands of charity, and, having fallen in with her father, waited to accompany him back. They were walking quickly, for the night was cold, when a wild shouting arrested their steps.

'Hoi! hillo! Mr Chepstow, your reverence, stop!'

Turning quickly, they found themselves hotly pursued by a boy, whose hob-nailed shoes rattled along the frosty road, and who wildly waved his cap in the air. They waited until the boy came up.

'Please, your reverence,' he gasped, 'you be wanted down at Plas Ruthven. Old Owen Glendower, he have broke his neck and be a dying.'

Mr Chepstow, whose weary eyes had, two minutes before, been conjuring up a picture of his cosy parlour at home, turned at once, and, still accompanied by Marion, walked towards the place where his aid was required. As they went, they endeavoured, by a few well-applied questions, to extract some information from the panting, excited boy. Thus they learned that old Owen Glendower, who, the reader may remember, was an old and valued servant of Richard Glamorgan, and who had been left in charge of Plas Ruthven during his master's absence abroad, had that evening emerged from his dreary prison-house and walked down to the inn to purchase a little spirits to keep out

the cold; having got into the cosy bar, he became so enamoured of the good things which it contained that he refreshed himself rather too freely; and on leaving the inn he fell and struck his head dangerously on the stone step before the door.

When the clergyman and his daughter arrived at the inn, they found Owen lying on the sanded floor in the parlour in a state of insensibility. He presented a by no means pleasant sight. He had never been prepossessing; he was very short in stature; he had a deformed figure, one short leg, and a face like a traditionary gnome. Indeed, it was generally believed by the superstitious that he was not a human creature at all, but that he had been created and left upon the earth by the evil spirits, half terrene half marine, who inhabited the weed-hung caves by the sea. Although he had spent his life

in Plas Ruthven, no one knew much about him. He had occupied his boyhood in knocking about the Plas Ruthven stables; his manhood in the gloomy house, and now that old age had crept upon him, and his hideous body was becoming more hideous and shrunken than it had ever been, he hovered about the place like a Troll, and gazed from its decaying windows with evil ghost-like eyes upon any human creature who happened to come near. He seemed a creature of decay and darkness; his nature cherished an intense dislike for all men, but against Mr Chepstow most of all. For he remembered, although perhaps the good clergyman had quite forgotten, how, on a black and stormy night, many years ago, as he sat watching the beacon which he had set up to misguide storm-tossed ships at sea, he had been pounced

upon by the young clergyman, who happened to be abroad, who forced him to extinguish his light, and threatened to prosecute and punish him severely should he ever offend again. The trade which he had practised for some time was thus brought to an end; but his intense hatred for Mr Chepstow remained. For some time he found no means of gratifying his passion for revenge; but a few years later, when the clergyman's wife died, old Owen stood on the hill and gazed at the curtained windows of the vicarage with gleeful eyes.

'Look you now, it's a long lane that's got no turning,' he muttered, 'and your fine spell of luck be coming to an end. It be something for a poor twisted, stunted creature like me to see *you* broke down. Well, we be all born but we ain't buried; troubles be begun but they ain't ended;

and them that lives longest will see most.'

Although the simple clergyman was ignorant of the very malignant feelings entertained against him by this man—he could never bring himself to regard him with trust or confidence; but to him one man in affliction was the same as another, and he hastened to his relief as eagerly as he would have done to that of his dearest friend.

He found Owen suffering from a severe scalp wound, from which the blood was issuing freely; he was, therefore, more in need of bodily than spiritual comfort, although the people standing around already looked upon him as a dying man.

Mr Chepstow, having ascertained the state of the invalid, instead of falling on his knees or producing his prayer

book, pulled off his coat. Marion threw off her cloak, and the two set to work to staunch the flow of blood and plaster up the wounds. When this was over, when the blood stains were wiped from the face, and everything had been done for the comfort of the suffering man, the clergyman paid for a room and helped to convey him to bed. Having seen him comfortably settled for the night, he pulled on his overcoat and took his leave, promising to be down betimes in the morning.

It was growing late by this time. The night was very dark and the roads so dangerously frozen, that the clergyman and his daughter had to cling together for safety. The roads were very quiet; but when they had left the inn a hundred yards behind them, they met a solitary figure coming down the hill. It was the

post boy making his way to the village. Enlivened by the glass of home-brewed ale which he had had at the vicarage, he was singing to relieve the monotony of the road.

Mr Chepstow paused.

'You seem in good spirits, my lad,' he said. 'Have you been to the vicarage?'

'I have, your reverence. I left you three letters and a paper, and Miss Alice, God bless her, gave me a glass of your new-made ale to keep out the cold. Good-night, your reverence. Good-night, Miss Chepstow.'

The boy plodded on towards the village, while Marion and her father again took the road which led to their home. At length their journey came to an end; they stood before the little wicket gate which led into the vicarage garden.

'How it is snowing,' said Marion; 'look, papa, the hedge is quite white already. You

must be cold and quite tired out. I am glad we've got home at last.'

They passed through the gate and the garden, and with a small latch-key let themselves in at the front door. Mr Chepstow paused in the hall to hang up his snow-covered hat and coat, but Marion walked towards the dining-room. She reached the threshold, paused, stood petrified for a moment, then ran forward to the hearth. A figure clad in white satin lay prone and speechless before the fire. Marion fell on her knees, lifted the head, kissed the blood-stained lips, felt the cold cheek, the cold hands, then uttered a piercing cry.

'Oh, papa, papa, Alice is dead!'

CHAPTER XV.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA.

THE cry, uttered in such heart-rending tones, reached Mr Chepstow's ears as he was shaking the snow from his hat in the hall; he hurried into the dining-room to gaze upon what appeared at first to be the lifeless body of his child. Alice still lay upon the hearth, her head now rested on her sister's lap; a death-like pallor was on her cheeks, and from her parted lips a thin drop of blood was trickling.

For a moment Mr Chepstow stood bewildered, believing that his daughter's horrified

cry was true; then regaining his presence of mind, he knelt on the hearth and carefully examined his child.

'She is not dead, Marion,' he said, with a relieved sigh; 'she has only fainted, my dear. Come, we'll carry her up to her bedroom, and try to recover her there; the heat of this fire will make her worse. My darling! my poor dear girl!' And Mr Chepstow, who, despite his years, still possessed much of his youthful vigour, lifted Alice from the ground and bore her tenderly to her room. Marion walked before with a candle in her hand, while the maid, who had been attracted by the terrified cries, brought up the procession, holding the dining-room lamp in her trembling grasp.

The episode, alarming as it at first appeared, bore by this time no very serious aspect to those who stood around the bed upon which

lay the girl's still lifeless form. Both Mr Chepstow and Marion, now that they could use their reasoning powers, easily accounted for the accident. It seemed to them that Alice, being overcome by the heat of the room, had fainted, and in falling, had struck her mouth against the fender and cut her lip. Great was their astonishment therefore, when, on recovering consciousness, Alice sat up on the bed, looked wildly at each face in turn, then on seeing the dress she wore, uttered a heart-rending shriek, and fell again lifeless upon the pillow.

This time it seemed that all the skill in the world would not bring her back to consciousness. It was certain that medical aid must be procured, but how? There was only one doctor to be had, he lived in the village which lay three miles away. It was snowing hard by this time. Mr Chepstow

knew that the roads were dangerous for walking; he felt tolerably sure he would never succeed in getting any one to ride three miles on such a night. But his child's life was at stake: he felt that he must save it, even at the risk of losing his own.

'Marion, my dear,' he said quietly, 'are you afraid to be left alone for a little time?'

'No, papa. Why?'

'I'm going for the doctor. I'll send up Mrs Lubin as I pass the inn. Try to bring the poor child round, and keep her up till I return.'

And Mr Chepstow, cold and weary as he was with his long day's work, again got on his hat and coat, and hurried down the road which he had trodden scarce half-an-hour before.

The night was black as pitch, the wind

swept over the hills in bitter gusts, and as the clergyman went along, buttoned up to the throat with the collar of his coat turned up, and the brim of his hat turned down, the snow was drifted so thickly into his face that it almost blinded him. After much stumbling and a good deal of trouble he reached the inn, with his face and hands half-frozen, his whole body thickly covered with snow. His appearance in such a plight, and at such an hour, caused some sensation, but no sooner was his sad news told than half-a-dozen men offered to undertake his journey for him. At first he hesitated, then he declined the offers, and asking Mrs Lubin, the landlady, to go up to the vicarage, he mounted the best horse she could give him and rode away into the night.

'Their offers were kind,' he said to himself; 'but to-night, old as I am, I'll

travel this journey quicker than any man in the village.'

Meanwhile Marion, left alone in the vicarage, did everything in her power to bring her sister back to consciousness. First she undressed her, and got her to bed; having done this she caused the wedding dress, the satin shoes, silk stockings, and embroidered veil to be carried carefully from the room; for Marion had noticed that, from some unaccountable reason, the sight of these things had made her sister faint again. Then Marion set to work to try and restore consciousness.

While she was thus occupied Mrs Lubin arrived. She was a middle-aged, motherly woman, who had seen a good deal of sickness and death; she at once relieved Marion of her task, and slowly wooed back the life which seemed to be slipping away.

Alice opened her eyes. Marion, kneeling beside the bed, bent forward to kiss her sister's cheek.

'Alice, dear, do you know me? Are you better now?'

Alice did not reply. Marion, looking at her more closely, saw that the eyes, though open, were quite dim and utterly devoid of recognition.

About midnight the clergyman returned, bringing the doctor with him. While the doctor was upstairs with Alice, the clergyman stood musing with his back to the dining-room fire. His clothes were soaked with melted snow, and on coming in contact with the heat of the fire they emitted a thin white steam, which soon enveloped him in a cloud. He took no heed. The three letters which the postman had brought him still lay as Alice had placed them;

but the open paper, which had been crushed beneath her, had been picked up from the ground and thrown, crushed as it was, upon the sofa. The clergyman saw, but he did not heed; his eye was vacant, his thoughts were far away.

The servant came in to lay the cloth for supper. After the arrival of Mrs Lubin at the vicarage, the services of the servant maid had not been required upstairs, so, instead of standing and helplessly wringing her hands, she had set herself to prepare something warm for her master and the doctor, who, she knew, would require it after their bitter ride that night. When she entered the dining-room with the cloth thrown over her arm, she was amazed to find her master standing on the hearth in a perfect cloud of steam.

'I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't know

you was in the room,' she exclaimed, and paused in some confusion; then, looking at the cloud about him, she added, 'Hadn't you better take off your wet clothes, your reverence? I put dry ones on your bed, and lit the candles in your room. I knew you'd be wet and cold, riding many miles on such a night as this.'

The clergyman went upstairs to change his clothes, while the servant, left alone, began to speculate as to the cause of Alice's illness that night.

'There must ha' been something,' she said to herself; 'no over-hot room could have put her into hysterics and made her so bad all of a sudden, for when she come out with that glass of ale she was as well as could be. How sorry she looked when she didn't get a letter! Could that have done it? No! She was reading that paper when she

fainted! I wonder if 'twas anything in that? I'll just take a look and see.'

She took the crumpled paper, smoothed it out, laid it on the table, and was about it look it over, when the sound of footsteps warned her of some approach. She hastily returned the paper to its place on the sofa, and continued to lay the cloth.

The doctor and the clergyman entered the room together. The doctor sat down in one of the easy-chairs, and the clergyman stood in his favourite attitude with his back to the fire.

'Is she very ill, doctor?' asked Mr Chepstow, gazing anxiously into his companion's face.

The doctor nodded.

'Very ill, I'm sorry to say!'

Silence ensued. The doctor seemed to

be thinking in a puzzled way, and the clergyman felt sad and sick at heart.

The servant brought in the supper. Both men sat at the table; the doctor ate heartily, but the clergyman took nothing. At length the doctor, looking up, encountered the earnest gaze of his companion.

'I am puzzled by this illness, Mr Chepstow,' he said; 'it certainly seems to me to have been brought on by some sudden and violent shock to the system. Miss Chepstow tells me that her sister has received no such shock.'

'None, that we are aware of!'

'Humph! then you can't account for the attack?'

'Not unless close confinement and hot rooms would do it. For the last few weeks she has been working away at her wedding dresses and taking no outdoor exercise at

all. This afternoon, when Marion and I went to the village, we left her shut up in the work-room with the dressmaker; when we came home we found her dressed up like a bride, lying insensible on the hearth here. She had evidently put on her wedding dress for us to see, and, while waiting, had been overcome by the heat of the room and fainted.'

The doctor looked dubious, but he only said,—

'Was she alone in the house?'

'No, Jane was at home.'

The doctor turned his eyes towards the servant, who was quietly removing the supper things.

'Do you know,' he said, 'what Miss Chepstow was doing when she was taken ill?'

'I don't know for certain, sir, but I think she were reading the paper.'

'Reading the paper, eh?'

The doctor's eye brightened: he seemed to have found a clue at last. He gazed rather aimlessly about the room, when the paper was put into his hand.

'Here it is, sir,' said the girl; 'it lay all crushed under Miss Alice, and when she was lifted up she had part of it held fast in her hand.'

'Good God!'

The doctor was not listening to the girl. He had been running his eye carelessly over the columns, and now he gazed with painful intensity at one spot.

'Good God!' he exclaimed again; then suddenly remembering that he was not alone, he read the following paragraph aloud:—

'The China and Indian mail brings us an account of a horrible affair in Chinese waters.

While the steam tender *Sapphire*, having on board the passengers of the *Windsor Castle*, an English vessel which sails between London and Canton, was proceeding up the estuary to land her passengers at Canton, she was boarded by Chinese pirates. The pirates appear to have come on board as passengers at one of the landing-stages, and as soon as the little vessel steamed well off from land, they threw off their disguises and showed themselves armed to the teeth. A frightful scene of slaughter ensued. The Englishmen fought bravely, but, being unarmed and taken unawares, they were unable to match their murderous foes. The battle ended in the wholesale slaughter of both passengers and crew, including several women and children. The following is a list of those who were on board the tender and who must have perished.'

A long list of the dead was added. Not far from the head of the list appeared the well-known name,—

Richard Glamorgan, Esquire, passenger to Canton.

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